

# Are Anti-Bullying Strategies Working?

By David Knuckey

The University of South Australia has released a new report on the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies in Australian schools.

The study examined student, parent, teacher and education leader experiences, in public schools across six states.

## Key Findings

Approximately 15% of students are being bullied.

Disabled students are bullied more often.

Indigenous students were more often racially harassed.

All schools report having an anti-bullying policy - but less than half of students know they exist.

Only 37% of students report being bullied to teachers / counsellors.

Parents of bullied children are least satisfied with the work of teachers.

Results on a test of knowledge about bullying showed that on many issues teachers were in error or divided in their beliefs.

Teachers believe anti-bullying training was inadequate.

Teachers find it difficult to focus on bullying, due to other responsibilities and lack of resources.

## Background

*In Australia it has been reported that approximately one child in four is being bullied over a period of several weeks. Evidence of the psychological harm, especially through the loss of self-esteem and persistent feelings of anxiety and depression, has been widely reported. In addition, studies have shown that peer victimisation is significantly related to poor academic performance.*

With all that has been learned about bullying in the last decade, it is evident that not all bullying strategies work. The most comprehensive data suggests that well designed, carefully implemented and evaluated anti-bullying strategies reduce bullying by only 20%.

## The Study

Four studies were used in this latest research:

1. Student Questionnaire
2. School Questionnaire
3. Parent Questionnaire
4. Knowledge of Bullying Quiz.

To be eligible, a school had to cater for mainstream students - distinct from those catering exclusively for special needs students.

The quiz was completed by 476 teachers and 1688 students. Of these, 599 students were from South Australia.

913 students were girls and 775 were boys. 6.7% of students were Indigenous. 5.1% of the students were identified as having a disability.

## Student Perspective

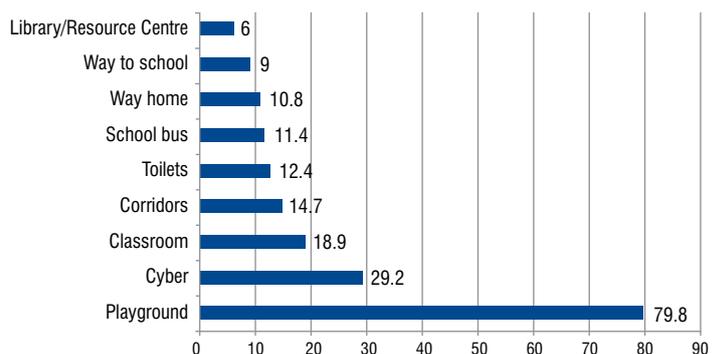
### Frequency of bullying

Spreading malicious rumours is the most common form of bullying; 30.7% say it happens often in their school. Other types of bullying include:

- Mean and hurtful teasing - 26.3%
- Being ignored and excluded - 19.5%
- Being hit - 14.9%
- Being made afraid of being hurt - 12.2%
- Cruel things said online - 12.2%
- Racial harassment - 10.5%
- Harassing texts or emails - 8.9%
- Sexual harassment - 3.8%

### Where bullying occurs

Most bullying occurs in the playground and in cyberspace. Nearly 20% of students witness bullying in the classroom.



## Where do children feel unsafe

Percentage of children feeling unsafe half the time or more

| Locations          | %    |
|--------------------|------|
| At school          | 22.2 |
| To and from school | 12.2 |
| Cyberspace         | 14.1 |

School was perceived as the least safe environment. Girls feel less safe than boys.

## Bystanders

Nearly 80% of children saw bullying occurring at least half the time with others present.

Of the 97% who saw bullying occur with others present:

- 19% said nobody did anything to stop it
- 47% said sometimes people speak out
- 27% said someone usually said or did something to stop it
- 7% said someone always speaks out.

Does speaking out by bystanders have an effect:

- 23% said it makes no difference
- 37% said it sometimes stops bullying
- 22% said it stops bullying about half the time
- 16% said it usually stops bullying
- 3% said it always stops bullying.

## Do bullied children seek help

Children were asked whether victims seek help and if teachers are effective in stopping the bullying:

- 17.8% always tell somebody
- 44.9% usually tell
- 32.9% sometimes tell
- 4.4% never tell anybody.

***A slight majority of the students (53.7%) saw outcomes as positive more than half the time, but an almost equal number (46.3%) saw less positive outcomes occurring, i.e., bullying stopping half the time or less.***

## Knowledge and effectiveness of schools' bullying policy

49.1% of students did not know if their school had an anti-bullying policy.

Of those who believed their school had a written bullying policy - one third had not seen it.

## Perceived usefulness of the school's anti-bullying policy Teacher responses to bullying

| Perceived usefulness | % Responding |
|----------------------|--------------|
| It is not useful     | 12.0         |
| It might be useful   | 32.3         |
| It is quite useful   | 43.9         |
| It is very useful    | 11.8         |

Nearly 90% of students saw teachers as mostly or always motivated to stop bullying. One in ten students saw only half or less motivated to stop bullying.

When asked if teachers keep an eye on children in the schoolyard to stop bad things happening:

- 52% - yes
- 31.9% - mostly
- 11.6% - only sometimes
- 4.5% - never.

Does your school train some students to help those who are having trouble?

- 31.5% said yes.
- 51.8% did not know.
- 17.7% said no.

***Of the 471 students who evaluated the work of students trained to help others, 66% thought their work was useful.***

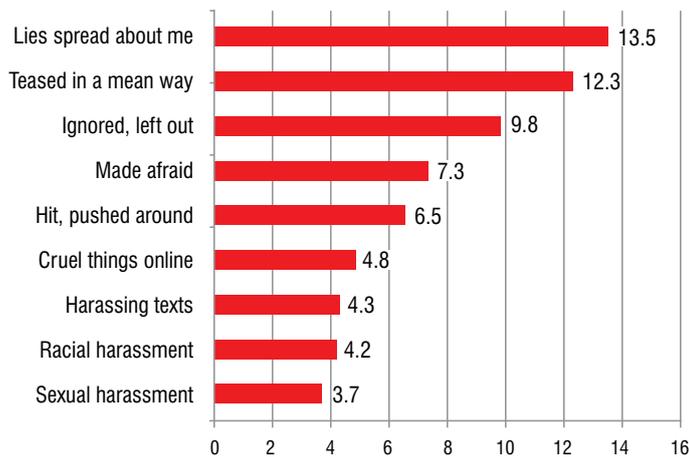
## Personal experiences of school bullying

Girls were more often bullied by being ignored, having rumours spread about them, teased and made fun of, sent harassing texts and cruel things being said about them online.

# Are Anti-Bullying Strategies Working? *continued*

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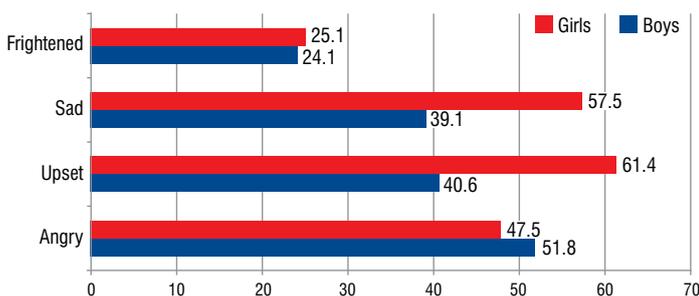
Boys were bullied by being kicked or pushed around and by being harassed racially and sexually.



*Among Indigenous students 10.5% report being a target of racial harassment 'quite often' or 'very often'; among non-Indigenous students the corresponding figure was 3.2%.*

## Effects of bullying

Up to half of those bullied experienced one or more negative emotions to a relatively high degree. Girls reported being more upset, sad and frightened.



13.3% of bullied girls and 15.1% of bullied boys indicated that they had stayed away from school because of bullying. Many more have considered it.

35.6% of bullied students believed bullying had made it harder to do school work.

## Who is aware of bullying

Other students and parents are most likely to be aware of bullying.

Students who are bullied seek help from the following:

- 52.3% - other students
- 51.4% - parents
- 37.7% - teachers / counsellors
- 10.2% - out of school counsellor
- 4.2% - police.

When asked the same question, schools thought bullied children were most likely to ask teachers for help, with other students ranking second, parents ranking third, police ranking fourth and out of school counsellors last.

When asked why they do not seek help from teachers, students gave seven basic reasons:

1. The bullying wasn't severe enough
2. There were preferred options (parents, friends)
3. Uncertainty about the teacher's role
4. Having to disclose a personal matter to someone they have an impersonal relationship with
5. Negative views about the help that would be offered (they might laugh. I've seen them brush off other students' problems)
6. Fear of repercussions (I would be bullied even more)
7. A sense of personal inadequacy (I was frightened).

## Outcomes of reporting bullying to teachers

| Type of school | Reported bullying outcome |         |      |       |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------|------|-------|
|                | Stops                     | Reduces | Same | Worse |
| Primary        | 36.4                      | 32.6    | 27.0 | 9.1   |
| Secondary      | 21.8                      | 54.5    | 20.0 | 5.5   |
| Combined       | 13.9                      | 41.7    | 36.1 | 8.3   |

## Perceived helpfulness of the school in bullying

|       | Very helpful | Helped a bit | No effect | A bit worse | A lot worse |
|-------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Boys  | 36.4         | 33.8         | 19.5      | 3.9         | 6.5         |
| Girls | 41.4         | 44.0         | 12.1      | 1.7         | 0.9         |

26.3% of boys and 26.6% of girls who had been bullied, 'didn't know' or were unlikely to seek help from a teacher again.

## Parent Perspective

Around one third of parents either didn't know or believed their school did not have an anti-bullying policy.

Parents of bullied students reported that 30% of them had stayed home from school because of bullying at the school.

### How parents were informed of bullying

Parents were informed by one or more sources:

- 94.9% were told by their child
- 27.8% saw it happen
- 51.4% were told by another child
- 28.6% were told by an adult who was not a teacher
- 14.1% were told by the school.

47.5% of parents of bullied children reported that the school took no action.

### Effect of the school's action

- Stopped the bullying 27.4%
- Reduced the bullying 32.9%
- Made no difference 30.1%
- Made matters worse 9.6%

58.7% of parents reported that the school could have handled the incident better. 32.5% of parents said the school handled cases quite badly or very badly. 16.2% said the school handled it very well. The remainder reported the school handled it moderately well or quite well.

### How parents think bullying could be handled better

1. Better surveillance by staff and greater sensitivity to the child.
2. Quicker identification of problems and better communication with parents.
3. Avoiding unfairness - as in removing victims from class rather than changing the behaviour of bullies.
4. Greater punitive measures against bullies rather than telling the victim to be resilient.
5. Improve response to parent requests for the matter to be mediated.

## Educational Leader Perspective

### Anti-bullying policies

While all schools must have documented bullying policies, educational leaders acknowledged 'great variation' in their development, implementation and review.

Leaders were not surprised that more than half of students were unaware of their school's policy.

*The policies are not user friendly, in terms of they're not worded in a way that the general public would readily understand, or they're out of date, or there's very minimal information available.*

Some educational leaders stated that, 'in developing anti-bullying policies schools were merely fulfilling their obligations, because they were required to have a policy on everything under the sun and would have it there just as part of their compliance....'

A lack of specialised staff was also highlighted. Several schools surveyed reported that they did not have access to a school counsellor or psychologist.

*Although the secondary schools each had a full-time counsellor, on average primary and combined schools had such a person for one day a week. Arguably the work done by counsellors is especially important in the early years of schooling, enabling children at risk to be identified more readily and provided with necessary help and support.*

## Conclusion

Bullying is a serious and prevalent problem in our schools. "Anti-bullying policies have been developed, but around 50% of students and 35% of parents are unaware of their existence. Schools are using a variety of approaches to handle bullying, but with only limited success. Knowledge of bullying among teachers who completed a quiz was in many cases inadequate, more so among teachers in primary schools. Reports from teachers and educational leaders indicate a strong need for schools to be more adequately resourced in this area and to receive appropriate and specialised training". ■

*Source: The Prevalence And Effectiveness Of Anti-Bullying Strategies Employed In Australian Schools*