



Spotlight

Bullying in Australian schools

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Bullying occurs in many forms, including overt physical aggression, covert teasing, harassment online or in the classroom. It has lasting effects for victims, bullies, peer groups, families and school communities.

It is an issue facing each and every school in Australia. In fact, a largescale survey conducted in 2009 found that one in four Australian year four to nine school children had been bullied (Cross et al., 2009). It has also been estimated that approximately one in five Australian young people had been cyberbullied in a twelve month period (Katz et al., 2014).

With the number of social media platforms readily available to Australian children continuing to increase, it is likely this figure is conservative. Considering the prevalence and ongoing effects on victims' mental health, grade performance and attendance, student-to-student bullying is a concern that all teachers and school leaders are likely to face (Al-Raqqad et al., 2017; Juvonen, Yueyan Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Katz et al., 2014).

As such, it is important to consider the role of teachers in bullying prevention and intervention, teacher attitudes and student perceptions of the efficacy of teacher responses to incidents of bullying.

What is Bullying?

Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (**overt**) or hidden (**covert**). Bullying of any form or for any reason can have long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders. Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying. However, these conflicts still need to be addressed and resolved.

Source: Student Wellbeing Hub (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017a)

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is a term used to describe bullying that is carried out through internet or mobile phone technologies. It is often combined with offline bullying. It may include a combination of behaviours such as pranking (i.e. hang-up calls), sending insulting text messages, publishing someone's private information, creating hate sites, or implementing social exclusion campaigns in social networking sites. It is also cyberbullying when a student uses technology to run a multi-step campaign to bully another student (e.g. setting another student up to be assaulted, video recording their humiliation, or posting the video-recording online and then sending the website address to others).

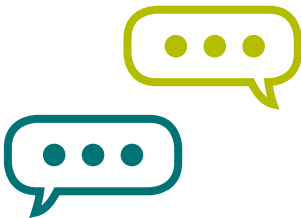
Source: Student Wellbeing Hub (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017a)

At a glance

- Teachers play a critical role in bullying prevention and intervention
- Student perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher responses to bullying are mixed.

Quick Facts – Covert bullying

- Covert bullying includes behaviours that are not easily recognised or acknowledged by teachers and parents (Barnes et al., 2012).



- One in six Australian students report being regularly bullied covertly (Cross et al. 2009).



- Covert bullying is at least as distressing as overt bullying (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014).

Bullying intervention in schools

Bullying prevention and intervention programs can potentially decrease the prevalence of bullying in schools (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). Typically, systemic approaches to anti-bullying programs are recommended (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrihy, & Kidman, 2014; Yoon & Bauman, 2014).

These approaches recognise the importance of the entire school community in preventing bullying and intervening when it does occur. The principle informing this approach is that everyone is responsible for the collective wellbeing of the community (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huising, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). The National Safe Schools Framework is underpinned by this principle and advocates for the creation of teaching and learning communities where all members feel safe from harassment, aggression, violence and bullying (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017b). Under this model, the role of teachers is critical.

However, several studies have found that student perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher responses to bullying are mixed (Rigby, 2011; Rigby, 2012; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Bullying is also becoming increasingly complex. A qualitative study conducted in North America found that educators see the rising use of social media platforms and increasingly covert (rather than overt) bullying behaviours as key challenges for school communities when designing effective anti-bullying programs. Additionally, the observation that many of these more covert forms of bullying occur off school grounds, especially in cyberspace, compounds this problem: further complicating the teacher's role in preventing and responding to bullying (Cunningham et al., 2016).

Teacher confidence matters

Teacher attitudes to bullying (particularly covert forms) as well as their perceived self-efficacy in handling such incidents informs the likelihood that they will notice bullying behaviour and that they will intervene effectively (Barnes et al., 2012; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014). For example, an Australian study involving over 300 teachers found that teacher self-efficacy was the most powerful predictor of intervention. The study also found that professional development designed to raise awareness of the form and effects of indirect (covert) bullying can increase teachers' self-efficacy for intervening (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2014).

A teacher's confidence in handling and preventing bullying behaviour and their attitudes towards bullying are likely to influence students' own perceptions of bullying (Veenstra et al., 2014; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). A Finnish study evaluating an anti-bullying program in 31 schools investigated student perceptions about their teacher's efficacy in decreasing bullying. Bullying was least common in classrooms where students perceived their teacher to be highly efficacious in handling bullying behaviours with low effort (i.e. without needing to exert a great deal of effort to stop the bullying behaviours, indicative of strong classroom management) (Veenstra et al., 2014). These results indicate student perceptions of teacher responses to bullying can impact the likelihood of bullying occurring.

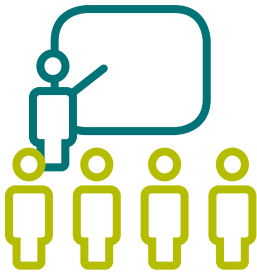


At a glance

- Teachers find it difficult to effectively respond to incidents of cyberbullying.



- Professional development is necessary to support teachers to understand the various forms and effects of bullying.



Bullying intervention is becoming more challenging

Responding effectively to incidents of bullying, especially covert behaviours, is a challenging aspect of the teacher's role.

In a largescale survey of Australian teaching staff, the majority of respondents indicated that they lacked sufficient skills to deal with cyberbullying and that teachers required more training to address covert bullying (Barnes et al. 2012). The survey results also indicated that teachers need additional support to understand the harmful effects of covert bullying and how to recognise its various forms, particularly those relating to technology (Barnes et al. 2012).

This finding is supported by data collected through AITSL's online [Teacher Self-Assessment Tool](#) (Teacher SAT); a free interactive resource that helps teachers reflect on their practice against the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Teacher Standards) and plan their professional learning. It asks teachers to self-report levels of proficiency across the Teacher Standards.

Within the Teacher Standards, the focus areas most relevant to bullying are contained in **Standard 4 - Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments**. They are:

- 4.1 Demonstrate the capacity to organise classroom activities and provide clear directions
- 4.2 Manage classroom activities
- 4.3 Manage challenging behaviour
- 4.4 Maintain student safety
- 4.5 Use ICT safely, responsibly and ethically

Quick link

[Find out more](#)

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers let you know what you should be aiming to achieve at every career stage of your career.

[The Standards](#)

As of April 2018, almost 25,000 Australian teachers have completed the Teacher SAT. Most notably, almost one quarter of these respondents rated their practice in relation to focus area 4.5 - Use ICT safely, responsibly and ethically - at the lowest career stage (Graduate). This is a considerably larger proportion than the other focus areas where only 2-5% of respondents self-rated their practice at the Graduate level.

Respondents were particularly likely to rate their practice at the higher career stages (Highly Accomplished and Lead) on focus area 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 indicating these teachers are more confident with managing classroom activities and behaviours than maintaining student safety and ensuring safe and responsible use of ICT.

This shows that these teachers have some knowledge of promoting the safe, responsible and ethical use of ICT in learning and teaching, but may not be implementing effective practice in the classroom. In line with the research reported above, this suggests teachers may lack confidence in maintaining student safety in the ICT space.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

The Teacher Standards describe the key elements of quality teaching and articulate what Australian teachers are expected to know and be able to do at four career stages: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead. The Teacher Standards inform the development of professional learning goals and provide a framework by which teachers can judge the success of their self-reflection and learning. Teachers can use the Standards to recognise their current and developing capabilities, professional aspirations and achievements.

Upon graduation from Initial Teacher Education, graduates are required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the competencies and issues outlined in the Standards to gain provisional registration as a teacher in Australia. After one year, provisionally registered teachers are further assessed against the Standards, at the proficient career stage in order to progress to full registration. Certification as a Highly Accomplished or Lead teacher is offered in most states and territories and is designed to recognise and promote teachers who are highly effective classroom practitioners.

At a glance

- Across Australia there are a number of resources available to teachers to assist them to address student bullying and cyberbullying.
- AITSL has produced 40 *Illustrations of practice* demonstrating quality teaching in line with Standard 4 – Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments.

Quick link

Find out more

- These resources are underpinned by the [National Safe Schools Framework](#)
- [Student Wellbeing Hub](#)
- [Bullying No Way!](#)

Resources to help teachers respond to bullying

From this body of research it is clear that appropriate professional learning and ongoing support is necessary to better equip teachers to manage the myriad presentations of bullying behaviour occurring in and out of classrooms in Australia today.

AITSL is committed to continuing to support teachers with their professional learning. A key component of AITSL's work in this space is the Teacher Standards and the accompanying Teacher Self-Assessment Tool. Additionally, AITSL has produced a number of resources to assist teachers and school leaders to improve their practice. These include:

- 40 Illustrations of Practice (IOPs) that demonstrate high-quality teaching practice against Standard 4, from the Graduate to Lead teacher career stages, including IOPs specifically related to prevention, response and teaching about bullying as part of behaviour management in the classroom.



[Cyberbullying](#)



[Positive learning environments](#)



[Responding to challenging behaviour](#)

- Multimedia illustrations as part of the [Learning from Practising Leaders](#) series that shows leading teachers working with their colleagues by modelling practice on specific areas, such as behaviour management.

AITSL has also developed resources for early career teachers. The *My Induction app* supports beginning teachers to maintain safe and supportive environments through access to resources and tips on managing classroom behaviour and fostering classroom discussion. Beginning teachers are able to practice how they would manage disruptive learners in the classroom as well as draw on the expertise of nationally certified Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers through the Question Bank.

Conclusion

Teachers play a critical role in bullying intervention and research has demonstrated that teachers who are confident in their responses to bullying behaviour can actually reduce the likelihood of incidents occurring.

However, effectively responding to bullying, particularly covert behaviours such as cyberbullying pose complex challenges for teachers. Increasing dependence on social media and online platforms is changing the form bullying behaviours take in and out of schools today. Teachers lack the confidence in their skills to appropriately respond to bullying and student perceptions of their teachers' efficacy in this space can seriously impact classroom attitudes to bullying.

Professional learning can increase teacher self-efficacy to intervene when bullying does occur. There are a number of resources available to Australian teachers to increase their knowledge and understanding of the various forms and effects of bullying, including the National Safe Schools Framework.



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AITSL is funded by the Australian Government