



SCHOOL BULLYING

*It's not just me.
What can I do about it?*

"When I started year 7 I will never forget my first day, wheeling into the main undercover area where everyone was gathering; it all went quiet and everyone just stopped and stared at me. It was like they had never seen a person in a wheelchair and didn't know what to do. It was terrible."

We often hear stories very similar to this at MDNSW from our young members or their parents. It can mark the beginning of a difficult school journey for many of our young people, especially when starting high school. Research has demonstrated conclusively that children with visible physical disabilities are more likely to be excluded from social activities, called names and be victims of bullying than their peers. Bullying is when someone intentionally hurts another person, or group of people, by using words or actions that embarrass, intimidate or threaten them. Bullying is a repeated behaviour; it's not just a one-off incident. It can be associated with low self-esteem, helplessness, depression, anxiety, sudden changes in behaviour and being quick to anger. There may also be physical signs such as torn clothing, scratches, bedwetting and poor sleeping, plus they may start not wanting to go to school, or not take part in activities, sit alone at school or lose interest in their schoolwork suddenly.

Bullying has extremely negative effects on everyone who gets bullied, but kids with disabilities are especially vulnerable, since they may already struggle with self-esteem issues, a desire to fit in and the fact that they may be less likely to stand up for themselves. Researchers found that the bullying experienced by children with disabilities was more chronic in nature and was most often directly related to their disability.

"I got to know a group of boys who I thought were going to be my friends, but pretty soon they started bullying me, saying horrible things like I was so short and fat and I should really exercise more. They don't understand that I can't control what my medications do to me, that I can't just get up and exercise and lose weight and that I get tired very easily. One day I remember when I was able to get up out of my chair, I got up to stretch and one of the boys thought it would be funny to run towards me then just veer away at the last minute. It was very scary as I was very wobbly on my feet and almost fell over. He thought it was funny to scare me but didn't realise how it made me feel."

15 year old member with DMD living in Sydney

OVERALL, RESEARCHERS HAVE CONCLUDED THAT CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES TEND TO GET BULLIED MORE BECAUSE:

- Children with motor difficulties may have difficulty reading, writing and participating in sport. As such, they are often made fun of on the playground and in class because they are unable to perform age-appropriate motor skills eg not being able to pass a ball fast enough when playing a team sport, or doing group art activities to the standard the other children would like, or they may be judged and laughed at because their writing may be shaky and slow. They may also have trouble fully participating in social and recreational activities, so that they become increasingly isolated from their peers, becoming a target for bullies
- Children with communication disabilities often have assistive technology devices that other students do not understand and, as such, the other students can view them as "weird". Some can even be resented for having ipads instead of books, as their peers don't understand why they get to use one, or what they are using it for
- Students with physical impairments may move slower, have less stamina and an unsteady gait. These conditions, as well as others, may be viewed as signs of weakness and precipitate physical or verbal abuse

Ref: Walk a Mile in Their Shoes Report, AbilityPath.org

SO WHAT ACTION CAN I TAKE WITH THE SCHOOL?

- Discuss the problem with the class teacher, year coordinator and/or school counsellor
- Be assertive, but not angry or accusatory. Gathering information is important, keeping a positive relationship with the school can assist in this process
- Arrange a meeting with the school to address any concerns you have. Use the available resources you have to support you in this process
- **The principal must ensure that the school implements an Anti-bullying Plan.** A plan can be developed collaboratively with students, school staff, parents, caregivers and the community
- Feel confident to ask for other allied health staff eg therapists, caseworkers, counsellors, MDNSW Client Service Coordinators etc., department representative staff and other **support people** to be present at meetings
- End any meetings with a **proposal** for how the situation will be managed. Any agreed strategies can be listed in the plan with actions clearly approved
- Keep in touch with the school to review the plan as required

WHAT IF THE BULLYING DOESN'T STOP?

- **Inform the school** of any further bullying incidents and **keep a record** of what happens and when
- The **Education Department** has a responsibility to provide regular updates, within the bounds of privacy legislation, to parents or caregivers about the management of any incidences
- Ask for your concerns to be **addressed in writing** so there is a record
- Speak to the school principal and request a meeting to discuss matters further with the **School Board** and or the **Leader of Social Inclusion**
- **Request information** on Departmental Appeal Procedures and the **Complaints Handling Policy**. If necessary seek further advice from your school regional office and or obtain legal advice about your options

At MDNSW, our Social Workers and Counsellors in our Client Services team can help you talk about any concerns you may have about school matters including bullying. We can provide a range of support in the form of advocacy, coordination of services, assistance with communication and setting up school meetings. We can also provide counselling to support you with exploring strategies and community resources that may help you to deal with any bullying incidences and complaints.

Marie Adamou, Client Services Coordinator/Counsellor, MDNSW

Marie and our experienced Client Services team can be contacted on 9809 2111 ext. 1

USEFUL CONTACTS & RESOURCES



- Australian Government Department of Education - State and Territory anti-bullying policies www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/behaviourpgrms/antibullying/index.php
- Bullying. No Way! www.bullyingnoway.com.au
- Safe Schools Hub www.safeschoolshub.edu.au
- National Centre Against Bullying www.ncab.org.au
- Every Student, Every School Learning and Support www.det.nsw.edu.au/every-student-every-school
- Kids Helpline 1800 551800 www.kidshelp.com.au [24hours a day, 7 days per week]
- Parent Line NSW 1300 30 1300 www.parentline.org.au [8am-10pm 7days per week]
- Australian Psychology Society [Medicare Rebate for counselling]
- Fact Sheet: Parenting Guide to help children manage conflict, aggression and bullying www.psychology.org/publication/tipsheet/bullying
- Advocacy: Family School & Community Partnerships Bureau www.familyschool.org.au