PENLEIGH AND ESSENDON GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Understanding Bullying

- a guide for parents

Why have we produced this booklet?

Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School is committed to providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment. Our Policy of Mutual Respect sets the high expectation that we encourage and actively support positive behaviours across our school community. All members of our school community contribute to this respectful environment.

Our Policy of Mutual Respect signals clear opposition to inappropriate behaviour and encourages a school environment free of bullying. Our welfare program employs restorative practices, which support students to build, maintain and repair relationships and help students make appropriate decisions. These strategies have a strong philosophical basis and are important in assisting to build a supportive community. They help us to minimise the occurrence of bullying and to respond constructively if any bullying does occur.

Similarly, if bullying does occur, the school response is informed by the Policy of Mutual Respect and restorative practices.

This booklet provides guidelines on how parents can support the Policy of Mutual Respect and restorative practices to create and maintain positive relationships in our school community.

The school encourages its teachers and parents to work in partnership in support of our children.

The problem of bullying

Bullying is defined in many different ways. Common to most definitions is that bullying involves harming others, whether physically, socially or psychologically. Many definitions also include that the behaviour is repeated over time and that the person who bullies is acting with intent. Importantly, most definitions of bullying focus on the behaviour rather than the individual character of the person perpetrating that behaviour.

Physical bullying can involve shoving, slapping, punching, kicking, pulling hair, and throwing objects. Verbal bullying can include taunting and mockery, whether private or public, verbal or written. Indirect methods of verbal bullying include malicious gossiping and excluding others from activities or social situations. Cyber bullying is a form of verbal bullying.

Bullying behaviours are unacceptable in a healthy community.

Responding to the problem

Comprehensive responses to bullying focus on the individual(s) causing the harm, the individual(s) being harmed, and on the social situation. Whenever possible, students are encouraged to understand the situation and to work actively to improve that situation.

Innovative strategies, with safe ways to take action to reduce the incidence of bullying and its harmful effects, are introduced to our students. As they go through school, your children learn a number of valuable life skills, including how to:

• Develop positive attitudes

• Avoid becoming trapped in rumination or other negative thought processes

• Have productive conversations with each other and understand social dynamics of a group

• Cope constructively within a group or class, even one that is not of their own choosing.

These are all valuable life skills.

Behaviour that is NOT bullying

It is important not to assume that every complaint from your child means bullying is occurring.
In the early years, children are developing social skills and play skills. As they develop these skills, they might respond to others inappropriately. For example, they might be too tactile or too intrusive. While such learning is taking place, it is important that children do not get labelled as bullies.

Similarly, every negative action of older students should not be assumed to be bullying. For example, an older student can bump or push near lockers or in doorways without intending to bully other individuals.

Many children get into disputes and disagreements from time to time. These are a normal part of childhood and should not be interpreted as bullying. Moreover teasing and name-calling can all be done in a spirit of fun. It is when unwelcome behaviour becomes persistent and threatening and children who cannot stand up for themselves are singled out, that it becomes bullying.

Talk to your child about school-friends and about how lunchtime and breaks are spent, but avoid direct questions such as "Have you been bullied today?" because children will often answer in the way they think their parents want them to.

What are the signs that a child may be affected by bullying?

A significant change in behaviour that cannot readily be accounted for may be a symptomatic response to bullying.

Here are some clear examples:

- Physical symptoms of stress (like loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, headaches or stomach pains)

- Acting-out behaviours (such as destruction or lack of care of prized possessions, angry outbursts over relatively trivial matters, or uncharacteristically heavy handed behaviour with younger siblings)

- Avoidance of school and other activities or withdrawing from the family and retreating to the bedroom.

Please be aware that such behavioural manifestations can be caused by factors other than bullying.

What parents should do when they see these signs or have other reasons to believe bullying is taking place?

- Speak with their child in an effort to understand what the concern is

- Discuss strategies including those offered in this booklet or offered directly by teachers at the school

- Contact the school to discuss these concerns.

We encourage you to keep open the channels of communication with the school.

As general rules:

Seek first to understand.
Ask questions out of interest and concern.
Listen and seek a description before speculating or providing advice.

Strategies for parents when their child has been involved in bullying

At one time or another, most children experience the feeling of being bullied and at other times they experience the feeling of acting like a bully.

If bullying has occurred, parents should:

• Not over-react, but rather try to remain calm

• Be mindful that your child will be aware of and affected by your reactions

• Just listen – let your child explain and express his/her points of view, thoughts and feeling; don't try to have answers for everything and avoid being judgemental

• Help your child mobilise his or her own resources, including friends, teachers, coaches, siblings and other family members who can be supportive

• Assist your child in examining his/her behaviour.

Parents should be aware that bullying behaviours might reveal that a child's social skills need refinement. It is important not to assume that a child understands social cues when dealing with his/her peers. Bullying can also be a symptom of a relationship that is breaking down.

Remember: We encourage school staff and parents to work in partnership.

What your child should do when he/she believes that he/she is involved in a bullying situation

Your child should be reminded of the following helpful actions:

• Move away from the situation as quickly as possible

• Talk with someone who can help, including a parent, a teacher, a counsellor and/or a chaplain

• Adjust behaviour and circumstances

Strategies to help your child relate well with others

• Make an effort to understand the situation fully

• Acknowledge feelings – the feelings of both your child and others involved

• Develop counter-responses

  • Establish what is expected in a situation so that appropriate actions and conversation are used in context

- Display warmth and empathy to strengthen relationships

- Counter destructive thoughts and break the cycle of negative thinking

- Cultivate a confident demeanour

- Communicate clearly. Communication skills are especially important in determining the success of a young person's interactions with his or her peers. This includes the confidence to share common interests, information and activities

- Develop parental, peer and teacher support

- Participate in a 'Structured Conversation.'

Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying is bullying or harassment that makes use of the diverse range of information and communication technology. Most of our students have a mobile phone and many regularly spend time in chat rooms. These factors increase the opportunity for unfriendly, and even malicious, comments to be circulated. The person targeted is vulnerable because of the enormity of the potential audience and the possibility that photos and other images can also be involved. For more information refer to the school's Statement on Cyber bullying found on our website.

To help protect your child from cyber bullying, encourage him/her to:

- Talk about the whole issue of bullying and harassment

- Become familiar with the school's Statement on Cyber bullying and its Mobile Phone Policy and support them

- Learn Internet safety and the proper etiquette when using Internet or phone services

- Report any incidents of cyber bullying to you.

You are encouraged to:

- Have the home computer in a public space and monitor your child's Internet habits

- Encourage your child not to give out personal details

- Protect your computer with security software such as content filters and firewalls.

When cyber bullying has occurred, encourage your child to:

- Keep and save as evidence any bullying emails, text messages or images

- Not reply to bullying or threatening messages

- Be aware that the tone and meaning of a written message can be misinterpreted

- Use blocking software

- Remember that sending or forwarding abusive or threatening messages is inappropriate an could be deemed unlawful.

The role of bystanders

It is understood that bystanders play a significant role in incidents of bullying. Students are encouraged to recognise their own bystanding behaviours and are tutored in how they can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. They learn that bystanders should not feed into the bullying behaviour. They should not laugh at bullies' jokes if these jokes are humiliating someone, nor promote or gather around a fight. As bystanders, the responsibility lies in de-escalating the situation.

Interventions by bystanders have the potential to reduce bullying. These include:

- Open support for the person being bullied in an attempt to stop the negative interchange. This might take the form of distracting the bully. Efforts to divert bullying behaviour may take the form of telling a joke, asking a question or pointing to action elsewhere

- If open support is difficult, a private word with the person targeted may be helpful as it can ease the impact of the bullying

- A private word with the bully after the event can be helpful also.

- Bystanders should report the incident to a teacher, counsellor or parent.

Adopting a positive approach

Many bullying behaviours can be understood as destructive answers to questions that we all have to answer at some stage:

- How do I gain a sense of control?

- Which relationships matter to me?

- What group do I belong to?

- Where do I stand in the group?

Bullying behaviour may be driven by the need to gain a sense of control - by controlling another person or controlling a social situation. Bullying can be a way to have oneself included in a group or to exclude someone else from a group. It can be a way to enhance one's status. Whatever the motive, bullying behaviours are unacceptable in a healthy community. A person who demonstrates such behaviours needs to learn and practice other more positive modes of behaviour.

It is useful to be aware that a student who is perceived by others as 'different' or less powerful can be the target of bullying. This can cause the person targeted to feel less confident, isolated and vulnerable.

A student who is repeatedly targeted in this way may feel unable to control the situation, believing that nothing can alleviate the problem. If a student believes he or she cannot effect change, he/she may not act to overcome problems. A person who is targeted should learn positive modes of interaction.

We encourage students to talk about feelings and have the appropriate vocabulary to speak about how they feel in different contexts.

A student may work to cultivate a confident demeanour, such as making eye contact, maintaining an upright posture, and trying to act similarly to how he/she would in a comfortable, relaxed situation. A technique when feeling anger or close to tears is to visualise or remember how he/she, or others, might feel and act when in the presence of trusted people and then to adopt this posture.

Another useful strategy is for a student to examine his/her place within his/her social group, considering where he/she fits, and whether he/she wants to alter that position or whether he/she feels others want to alter it. So in addition to asking 'What can I do differently?' a student can ask 'Is this the group for me?', 'Am I happy with my position within this group?' and 'Are others happy with my position within the group?'

A student who understands the dynamic of a group may not be manipulated as much by that dynamic. A younger student will have the insight that he/she can have more than one best friend, and there is often a similar insight by secondary students that 'I can be a member of more than one group.' These insights are helpful and increase one's capacity to deal with concerns.

Parents and students can learn a great deal from observing other children. For example often children who best "fit" do not draw attention to themselves but hover quietly in close proximity to the group. They make specific verbal entry bids: they pass compliments; they make no comment about themselves; they ask relevant questions; they do not make suggestions until asked. If rejected, they listen to criticism, make modifications and bounce back. In addition to all of this, they bring a cluster of non-verbal skills into play: facial expressions, posture, gesture, and eye contact.

As students develop increased self-awareness, they can make efforts to alter the situation and act in positive ways.

A Structured Conversation

A structured conversation is one of the strategies that we introduce to students and help them practise. It assists with interpersonal communication and also helps students ask themselves the right questions. It is structured in such a way that each participant has the opportunity to express his/her thoughts and feelings and to be part of decisions made. If each question is addressed fully, the participants can achieve reasonable, fair and workable outcomes.

When an individual addresses the crucial question of why he or she feels a particular way about a situation, he/she can address issues such as the power relationship within a group and understand how those elements contribute to how they feel.

Supporting our children to think laterally about situations in which they might find themselves may be very helpful. Children can benefit from a structure to support such thinking. The key can be encouraging the child to look at their predicament objectively, and to ask the following questions:

• What are the thoughts going through my head?

• What social situation am I in?

• Do I need to belong to this group?

• Are there hidden agendas at play here?

• Is there a power struggle going on?

Such reflective questioning can assist our children to make positive decisions and move on. A structured conversation may help with this examination.

These are the sorts of issues on which adolescents, in particular, tend to ruminate. A structured series of questions about their situation helps children to reflect as required, but then to move on - without 'catastrophising.' A student can then ask, 'What are some possible responses to this situation?' The best responses include immediately achievable, practical goals.

We encourage parents to contact the school when concerns about bullying arise so that teachers and parents can work together to support your children.

THE STRUCTURED CONVERSATION

REACHING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

- **What happened?**
  i.e. What did you do?
  What did you observe?
  What was reported to you?

- **How did you feel about it?**

- **What were you thinking?**
  i.e. What thoughts crossed your mind?
  What most concerns you?

COMMITTING TO ACTION

- **What do we need to achieve?**
  i.e. Where do we need to get to?

- **What are several ways to achieve it?**

- **Which of these are the most practical and mutually acceptable ways to achieve what we need to achieve?**
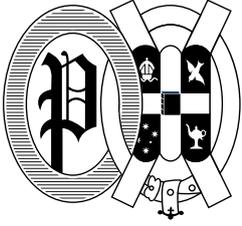
Essendon Campus
59 Raleigh Street
Essendon

Moonee Ponds Campus
83 Park Street
Moonee Ponds

Keilor East Campus
Rachelle Road
Keilor East

PO Box 417
Niddrie 3042

T (03) 9016 2000
F (03) 9016 2200

E mail@pegs.vic.edu.au
W www.pegs.vic.edu.au