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Chapter 2
Supportive School Culture

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Evidence for building a supportive school culture

Supportive school culture

A supportive school culture provides safety, encourages open communication, and supports a sense of connectedness to the school that protects students from the risks of bullying. The quality of relationships between and among staff, students and families is vital in fostering a safe, supportive and engaging school environment. Positive student behaviour should be encouraged and acknowledged at the whole-school level.

Students who are bullied and/or cyberbullied and students who bully or cyberbully others or who are both victimised and perpetrators, are more likely than those not involved to report feeling unsafe at school.\[168\] In contrast, schools that implement strategies which foster student safety have been found to reduce bullying behaviours.\[100,166\] Williams and Guerra (2007) for example, found that if students perceive their friends as trustworthy, caring and helpful they are less likely to be involved in perpetrating bullying and cyberbullying.\[167\] In this chapter, ways to foster a positive school culture, effective classroom practice and environment strategies, and the role of the peer group in building a supportive school culture are discussed.
Positive whole-school culture

Research has found students' perception of a positive school climate is associated with a reduced likelihood of bullying others.\(^\text{[168]}\) A key component of a supportive school culture is an ethos that bullying is not tolerated, with action taken to actively prevent or respond immediately and effectively to its occurrence. The increased use of technology by students means this ethos and associated actions need to be promoted in both online and offline environments. A positive whole-school culture is described in the following research:

- Schools express a culture of disapproval of bullying behaviour by valuing 'telling', responding consistently and ensuring adequate follow-up. School staff can play a major role in the bullying dynamic by inadvertently fostering aggressive behaviour by failing to speak out against it.\(^\text{[169]}\)
- From a bystander perspective, students need to know that supporting a person being bullied is promoted in the school, and have confidence that school staff will support their efforts to help the person being bullied and follow through on reports of bullying, as well as provide protection for those students who intervene to stop bullying.\(^\text{[117,118]}\) This is especially important given the main reason students do not intervene to stop bullying is because they fear retaliation and becoming the next target of the bullying.\(^\text{[120,170]}\)

Connectedness to school

Ensuring students feel connected to school is an important strategy to promote a positive school culture. Connectedness to school is the sense of belonging among students, families, school staff and the wider school community.\(^\text{[171]}\) Lower levels of connectedness to school are associated with greater frequency of peer harassment.\(^\text{[172]}\) Students who are bullied, who bully others, or who both bully and are bullied, are more likely to report feeling a lack of connectedness to school, compared to students with low or no involvement in bullying.\(^\text{[166]}\) Similarly, students who report greater connectedness to school and a positive school climate have a reduced likelihood of bullying and cyberbullying others.\(^\text{[167]}\) Furthermore, Bond et al. (2007) found that students who report higher levels of connectedness to school are more likely to have:

- higher levels of academic competency, achievement, attitudes and motives
- more positive attitudes towards self and others
- increased participation and engagement
- decreased rates of school dropout
- decreased engagement in health risk behaviours.\(^\text{[173]}\)

Also, Resnick et al. (1997) found that connectedness to school may be an important protective factor for adolescents experiencing emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, violence, and substance use.\(^\text{[174]}\) Extracurricular activities, such as sport, recreation, music, arts and service, are important ways to increase connectedness to school.\(^\text{[175-177]}\) These activities provide opportunities for increased social networks and social support, which appears to help students who are cyberbullied, in particular, as they are more likely to report emotional and peer problems.\(^\text{[178]}\)
Effective classroom practice and environment

Research has found poor teacher management of the class (as viewed by students) is associated with a higher likelihood of students bullying others, whereas more effectively managed classrooms have lower rates of bullying.[179] Classroom management refers to the capacity of teachers to plan and organise classroom instruction, learning and behaviours, actions to maintain order among students, promoting an environment where student-student and student-teacher cooperation is fostered, and maximising student engagement in their learning.[180] Farrington and Ttofi (2009) found that an emphasis on classroom management techniques to respond to bullying and the use of classroom rules against bullying, is key to reducing bullying behaviour.[4]

Teachers' personal characteristics such as their level of supportiveness and warmth, were also found to be related to students' perceptions of the social climate of the school and had an important influence on the bullying behaviour of students.[181] Students who engage in the perpetration of bullying and cyberbullying as well as students who are the targets of cyberbullying for example, were more likely to report negative perceptions of their relationships with their teachers and were more likely to feel uncared for by their teachers.[182]

Positive peer-group influence

Schools that develop an ethos as well as policies and practices that encourage and support safe, positive bystander action help to raise the level of bystander involvement. Providing students with opportunities to practise safe bystander skills can increase the efficacy and likelihood of students taking positive action when they see bullying occurring in their school. Younger students and girls are likely to show more positive attitudes towards students who are bullied[109] and are more likely to intervene to stop the bullying than are older students and boys.[109, 110]

Although many students do not agree with bullying, most do not intervene to stop the bullying, but instead act in ways which enable and maintain bullying.[117, 118] Possible reasons for students' failure to help a person being bullied include:

• their desire for peer acceptance[119]
• uncertainty about what action to take[120]
• fear of becoming the next target of the bullying[105, 120]
• lack of knowledge about appropriate strategies to use to intervene[117]
• assuming another observer will take action to stop the situation.[121]

Students who are bullied perceive positive actions from peers as more helpful than positive actions from adults or their own positive actions to address bullying.[124] When peers do decide to intervene to help a student being bullied:

• bullying stops more quickly[106]
• he/she is less likely to experience interpersonal and intrapersonal problems, and less peer-reported victimisation one year later[123]
• students are less likely to assign blame to the person being bullied[109]
• they report feeling good about themselves for attempting to intervene and are more likely to intervene again.[119]
Actions for building a supportive school culture

Positive whole-school culture

"It is everything we say and everything we do." [12]

A school’s culture is determined by the school community including its leaders, educators, students, parents and supporters. Encouraging positive values such as respect, trust and equity are the foundation of the policies and programs which ultimately drive the vision of what the school community aims to achieve. Promoting connectedness to school for students, staff and families, in an environment where they feel emotionally and physically safe, is a key part of developing and maintaining a positive school culture.

Reporting of bullying incidents became far more sophisticated and comprehensive when it was added to the school curriculum.
Strategies for good practice: Positive whole-school culture

1. The school culture supports a sense of connectedness and safety for all students, staff and families through positive, trusting and caring relationships.

2. The school treats bullying as a relationship issue and communicates a clear philosophy regarding how it feels about social relationships and bullying.

3. Positive social values such as respect, trust, fairness and celebration of diversity are promoted across the school community.

4. The school recognises that bullying can be reduced in the school environment and acknowledges everyone's responsibility to reduce bullying behaviour.

5. Staff wellbeing is an important focus of the school's culture.

6. Appropriate social behaviours are formally and informally modelled by staff.

7. Students are actively involved in the promotion of a positive whole-school culture.

8. All staff are skilled to build positive relations among students and between themselves and their students.

9. Students are empowered to increase their safety and problem solve.

10. Prosocial, cooperative behaviour is encouraged and acknowledged.

The school culture supports a sense of connectedness and safety for all students, staff and families through positive, trusting and caring relationships

While families are an important source of support for students, teachers are important in facilitating students' connectedness to school as they offer guidance, information, interest and attention; engaging students in the learning environment. In addition, peers play an important role in students' perceived connectedness to school, especially as students grow older. Because peers can positively and negatively influence students' behaviours, attitudes, achievement and attention, opportunities need to be provided for positive peer interactions and the development of friendships.

While staff and students' relationships can be developed through formal and informal interactions, this is particularly important in secondary schools where opportunities to build relationships and connectedness are often fewer. For example, consider having 'Mix it Up Days' where students sit next to someone different for lunch, to reduce lunchtime cliques. Participating in extra-curricular activities also provides opportunities to enhance connectedness to school through the development of positive relationships with school staff and other students.
The school treats bullying as a relationship issue and communicates a clear philosophy regarding how it feels about social relationships and bullying.

Bullying is more than a relationship between students who perpetrate bullying and those who are bullied; it is a breakdown in a social relationship, involving group values and group standards of behaviour that requires collaborative and consistent action across the school community for positive change to occur. Some students who have not developed the ability to get along with others need to learn and practise skills to resolve conflict, empathise with others, play fairly and treat others with kindness. Newsletter items included in Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.1 provide an opportunity for schools to communicate the behaviours that constitute bullying and the school’s response plan to bullying situations.

An awareness and shared understanding of bullying behaviour needs to be developed by actively consulting with all members of the school community including students. This awareness counters the view that bullying is an inevitable part of school life, challenges the attitudes of the community and invites it to examine its own social behaviour and culture. This shared philosophy forms the basis for policies which address expected student, staff, family and community behaviours. More information about policy review and development can be found in Chapter 3, Proactive Policies and Practices. In particular, Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.4 discusses the importance of and ways to identify the school’s vision statement and guiding principles.

Positive social values such as respect, trust, fairness and celebration of diversity are promoted across the school community.

A welcoming and supportive environment can be achieved by school community members showing:

- respect
- trust
- fairness
- appreciation of diversity
- thoughtfulness
- engagement in school life.

The social environment of a school is enhanced by strong leadership and the demonstration of clear expectations of what the school community hopes to achieve. A values clarification exercise can help to identify core values important to each school community.

**School community values clarification exercise**

1. Provide staff, students and families with clear information in accessible language about values, what they are and why having school values is important.
2. Provide opportunities for consultation about the core values the school community sees as being important to its school.
3. Allocate time for consideration, feedback and collation of nominated values.
4. Identify the core values the school will promote and express them in language which is easily understood by staff, students and families.
5. Promote the values often, clearly and consistently, for example at assemblies, in school handbooks and on the school’s portal/website.
In addition, schools may choose to promote their values at assemblies and through the school's newsletter. *Supportive School Culture Toolkits* 2.1 and 2.2 include examples of assembly and newsletter items which discuss the school's values and expectations.

### 4. The school recognises bullying can be reduced in the school environment and acknowledges everyone's responsibility to reduce bullying behaviour

A whole-school understanding about bullying and the development of concern for the safety and wellbeing of one another, are key factors in the reduction of bullying behaviour across school communities. *Chapter 4, Key Understandings and Competencies* provides information about how to develop an awareness of bullying behaviour and how it can be reduced.

Consistent actions will help increase feelings of safety and support among students and staff. Encourage students to identify key messages from the school's ethos/policy to help promote positive social skills and values. For example, a CHPRC research school uploaded 'winning' key messages to their school's portal and used them as school screensavers. In addition, the school laminated and displayed posters of the key messages in prominent places around the school to raise awareness of key issues.

Bullying involves more than the students who are bullied and those who bully others. Other children are observed to be present during most online and offline bullying/cyberbullying incidents at school. Bullying can continue because people who are involved do not talk about it or seek help. This includes bystanders to bullying situations. For more information about the role of, and ways to engage, bystanders see *Supportive School Culture Toolkit* 2.4.

### 5. Staff wellbeing is an important focus of the school's culture

Happy, valued and positive staff members are more likely to engage in policies, plans and practices which ensure the long-term sustainability of programs such as those to reduce bullying behaviour. This can be achieved by:

- celebrating the different and unique knowledge and skills each staff member brings to the school
- supporting school staff and rewarding their efforts to introduce and participate in programs which help reduce inappropriate, antisocial and bullying behaviour
- equipping staff with information, resources and training to build their capacity to implement these programs successfully
- establishing a social committee which is responsible for fostering positive relationships between staff and enhancing staff connectedness to the school
- considering unique ways of acknowledging staff for their contribution to the development of the whole-school culture.
Appropriate social behaviours are formally and informally modelled by staff

Students learn, feel and act based on what they see others say and do. Staff can unknowingly behave in ways that actively supports or condones bullying, or in ways that promote the reduction and prevention of bullying. The messages students receive from school staff are important as they provide constant, prosocial adult modelling (online and offline), particularly when students lack positive family role models.

By understanding what constitutes bullying behaviours (see Chapter 4, Key Understandings and Competencies), staff can model appropriate social behaviour which in turn can be repeated by students.

Students are actively involved in the promotion of a positive whole-school culture

To promote student ownership and promotion of a supportive school climate, schools need to actively involve them in:

• planning and decision-making (see Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.5)
• developing positive messages, such as respect and support (see Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.2)
• promoting and supporting positive and caring relationships (see Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3).

Promoting social responsibility among students encourages peer groups to support students who are bullied and discourages bullying behaviour through positive peer influence.

All staff are skilled to build positive relations among students and between themselves and their students

Teachers need to be provided with professional learning opportunities which:

• increase their awareness and identification of bullying and its short- and long-term effects on students
• enhance their knowledge and ability to integrate effective ways to prevent and respond to bullying in teaching and learning activities
• encourage reflection on their own behaviour and social interactions, and the influence of these on the values and behaviour of their students
• enhance their knowledge and ability to build positive social relations among students and between themselves and their students.

The promotion of these understandings and skills is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, Key Understandings and Competencies.
9 Students are empowered to increase their safety and problem solve

Fostering positive student relations, cooperative learning and prosocial behaviour will empower students to be aware of and take responsibility for their own safety and develop decision-making skills. This is likely to lead to increased levels of confidence in finding solutions to their problems. Empowered students know where and from whom to get help when they are experiencing difficulties. These social skills are addressed in the Friendly Schools and Supportive Schools curriculum materials described in Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.1.

Parents can also assist in the process by encouraging open and supportive communication with their children and discussing bullying behaviour with them (see School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkits 6.2 and 6.3).

10 Prosocial, cooperative behaviour is encouraged and acknowledged

The more opportunities students have to develop their social skills, the more likely they are to make prosocial choices that will strengthen their interpersonal relationships and facilitate success in school. As an example, schools and parents can encourage the development of assertiveness among students to assist them to support students who are bullied by stepping in to stop the behaviour, and to approach an adult for help if they see bullying occurring. Support School Culture Toolkit 2.5 describes assertive behaviour and how schools and parents can support development of this social skill among students.

Effective classroom practice and environment

An inclusive, trusting classroom environment will help students build care and empathy for others and provide cooperative and productive learning opportunities. Effective management of the classroom by teachers includes providing an environment in which students can be:

- focused
- attentive
- conscientious
- actively engaged
- connected to teachers and fellow students

Promoting a normative culture of disapproval of bullying within the classroom and using social skill building and bullying prevention and response strategies that are consistent with the school’s positive approach, maintains a safe and supportive school.
Strategies for good practice: Effective classroom practice and environment

1. Students participate actively in the development of classroom rules about bullying behaviours which are demonstrated consistently with the school policy.

2. Teachers have an understanding of their responsibility as behavioural role models.

3. Teachers use positive behaviour expectation strategies in the classroom to promote effective learning.

4. Teachers use their classroom, curriculum and knowledge of students to help those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying.

5. Behaviour support strategies are implemented to help students develop self-control and responsibility.

6. A variety of group activities and structures are used to facilitate positive decision-making about bullying situations.

7. Teachers engage students in cooperative learning methods and activities.

1. Students participate actively in the development of classroom rules about bullying behaviours which are demonstrated consistently with the school policy.

Classroom rules—based on the school’s behavioural policies—written as clear statements of expected behaviours, reflect the culture the school aims to promote. Student involvement in the development of these rules enhances their compliance, responsibility and ownership. In secondary schools this consultation with students may occur through the student leadership council and tutor group meetings. Learning activities can provide opportunities for identifying and practising specific behaviours to support implementation of classroom rules.

Students may need help to encourage the reporting of bullying. The following statements may help students:

**Asking for Help vs Dobbing**

*Asking for help is when someone feels the situation is out of their control and they are unable to deal with it alone and need help.*

*‘Dobbing’ is when a person tries to get attention or to get someone else into trouble.*

Asking for help for yourself or others is always okay.
2 Teachers have an understanding of their responsibility as behavioural role models

Teachers are responsible for ensuring the online and offline social behaviours they model encompass the core values promoted within the school community. When teachers model prosocial skills such as respect, compassion and negotiation, students learn to use these skills in their own social situations. All staff need to have a strong understanding of expected staff and student behaviours, particularly with the growth in popularity of online social networking sites, as discussed in Chapter 4, Key Understandings and Competencies. Further, Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.5 discusses opportunities for promotion of these understandings and competencies through the school’s behaviour expectations policy.

3 Teachers use positive behaviour expectation strategies in the classroom to promote effective learning

Staff who successfully develop positive behavioural expectations for students:
- use positive recognition as a means of promoting the prosocial behaviour of students
- help students who engage in bullying behaviour develop more appropriate modes of behaving
- provide positive ways of using student leadership and peer support skills
- encourage commitment to the values of trust and respect and a shared understanding of social rules and procedures.

4 Teachers use their classroom, curriculum and knowledge of students, to help those who are bullied and those who engage in bullying

Using strategic seating and grouping arrangements in the classroom can positively impact on cohesion, academic satisfaction and bullying behaviours. This may be particularly useful in secondary environments and at times of transition, when students choose their own groups and seating arrangements and, therefore, may be more vulnerable to exclusionary practices. Teachers can use their knowledge of the class’ social relationships to group students in ways that will enhance constructive interaction, including:
- set role grouping
- vertical grouping
- interest grouping
- expertise grouping
- experience grouping.

Embedding bullying prevention and positive technology use content in the curriculum enables the development of a shared understanding of classroom and social expectations, which support those who are bullied and those who bully others. Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.1 discusses the Friendly Schools and Supportive Schools curriculum in more detail.
Behaviour support strategies are implemented to help students develop self-control and responsibility

School staff can help to build students' capacity to manage their own emotions and behaviours, identify social goals and how to achieve them in a positive way, and how to view social experiences positively. These behavioural support strategies are best tailored to meet the strengths and needs of the school community.

Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3 outlines peer support strategies which can be used to assist students to develop appropriate behaviour when engaging with other students. In addition, the development of assertive social skills, as discussed in Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.5 enables students to communicate more clearly and effectively with others.

A variety of group activities and structures are used to facilitate positive decision-making about bullying situations

To make informed decisions about bullying situations students need to be provided with the opportunity to learn and practise decision-making skills. Providing students with a social decision-making framework allows a range of alternatives to be considered and explored before a decision is made. Students need to be encouraged to recognise their values and feelings toward the consequences of the decisions they make. Providing regular opportunities to practice decision-making facilitates students' ability to use this process in bullying situations.

A group decision-making model including the following components can be beneficial:
1. State the problem.
2. Gather information.
3. Examine the choices.
4. Consider the positive and negative consequences.
5. Decide, execute and evaluate.

Decision-making is a key theme promoted throughout the Friendly Schools and Supportive Schools curriculum materials described in Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.1.

Teachers engage students in cooperative learning methods and activities

Schools who implement a cooperative curriculum encourage a shared understanding of social rules and procedures and enable positive outcomes relating to group interaction. These activities promote honest communication, understanding differing perspectives, and encourages students' positive sense of self and concern for others.

Cooperative skills to promote in the classroom include:
• respecting other people's opinions
• sharing
• including others
• negotiating
• solving and responding to fights and arguments
• suggesting and persuading (versus bossing)
• making group decisions.

These skills can further be reinforced by parents and can be promoted through school newsletters (see *Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.1*), school assemblies (see *Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.2*) and family communication sheets (see *School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.2 and 6.3*).

**Positive peer group influence**

Positive peer group influence includes the authentic participation of students in the planning, implementation and evaluation of school actions, particularly those to reduce bullying. This can lead to increased student ownership and support and greater respect for systems and structures. Recognising, valuing and encouraging student participation fosters collaboration between students and staff, assists in ensuring school practices are relevant and helpful, and lets students know their voices are heard. Schools can foster positive peer group influence by:

• offering education targeting specific strategies to provide support for students being bullied
• encouraging peer intervention in bullying (such as the responsibilities of bystanders)
• encouraging students to withhold the social rewards that may maintain bullying
• promoting positive peer group influence and group norms that actively discourage bullying.

**Strategies for good practice: Positive peer group influence**

1. Students are valued as active participants in the development of school plans, policy and practice to reduce bullying.
2. Opportunities for students to voice their opinions are valued, encouraged and incorporated into school planning and activities.
3. Peer group actions to reduce bullying (such as positive bystander behaviours) are encouraged and commended at the whole-school level.
4. Support and empathy for students being bullied is encouraged.

**Students are valued as active participants in the development of school plans, policy and practice to reduce bullying**

Students can be actively engaged in policy development by:

• identifying how they would like to see staff respond to bullying situations
• identifying where bullying occurs (potential hot spots)
• identifying safer zones
• reviewing the policy
• identifying ways to distribute the policy
• assisting with the design of the policy to make it engaging for students.
The finished policy needs to be understood and accessible to all school community members. Chapter 3, Proactive Policies and Practices discusses proactive policy development and implementation for the whole-school community. In particular, Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.5 provides suggestions for reviewing the school’s behaviour expectation policies, including how to involve students in this process.

2 Opportunities for students to voice their opinions are valued, encouraged and incorporated into school planning and activities

Students have excellent ideas on how to promote positive behaviour across the school community and solve problems. When the focus is on students taking action and accepting responsibility for the outcome, results can be more powerful and meaningful. While each school will have a unique way of engaging students, the following may provide some initial ideas:

- student councils
- student trainers for parents and younger students (especially in ICT)
- students as researchers
- students as interviewers
- student events managers
- student tour guides
- students involved in policy writing
- students leading learning (input into inspiring programs offered at the school)
- student break time leaders (leading activities offered in break times).

It is not recommended that students are selected to play a formal role in resolving bullying situations (for example, peer mentoring). Students are well placed to encourage positive social behaviour and contribute to strategies that provide a supportive environment for students, such as online/offline procedures that make it easy for students to report bullying (see Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3 for a discussion of peer support strategies).

3 Peer group actions to reduce bullying (such as positive bystander behaviours) are encouraged and commended at the whole-school level

Bullying behaviour in the school usually takes place in the presence of other students (peers). Although many students do not agree with bullying, most do not intervene to stop the bullying, but instead act in ways which enable and maintain bullying. It is important that the onus for intervening in bullying incidents is not left to students alone, but rather, peer intervention efforts are viewed as complimentary to a whole-school approach to tackling bullying. Ensuring staff respond consistently increases students’ ability and willingness to intervene as they know they will be supported.

Teachers and school administrators who model consistent responses to bullying behaviour will see increased levels of peer intervention efforts. When students are mobilised to take action against bullying, they must feel secure that teachers understand their need to stay safe. For some students, in both primary and secondary schools, this means ensuring the information they share will not cause them to lose status in their peer group.

Leaders who provide opportunities for their staff to understand the reasons students may or may not be willing to intervene as bystanders, increase their school’s capacity to actively engage more students in positive bystander responses. Strategies for engaging bystanders are described in Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.4.
Support and empathy for students being bullied is encouraged

To respect how another student is feeling and respond in a positive and supportive way, is key to showing kindness, compassion and friendship and is integral to a supportive school culture. It can be hard to understand another person's experience of a situation, especially if we have not experienced these ourselves. It is possible, however, to respect other people's feelings and opinions.

Commonly recognised means of exhibiting respect in a school include:

- listening carefully
- offering encouragement
- being non-judgemental
- acknowledging experiences
- allowing for privacy/personal space in times of distress
- asking students to define what respect and support means for them—what it looks like, feels like and sounds like.

Summary

This chapter has discussed ways to build a supportive school culture through the promotion of whole-school strategies to foster connectedness to school, effective classroom practice and environments, and positive peer group influence. To support the achievement of a supportive school culture, three school stories are provided as examples of how CHPRC research schools have taken action in this regard, and the barriers and solutions they encountered in this process.

Schools wishing to use the strategies outlined in this chapter to enhance the supportiveness of their school may find the toolkits which follow to be helpful in this endeavour:

- **Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.1** includes 18 newsletter items which aim to promote common understandings about bullying behaviour and the school's approach to its prevention across the whole-school.
- **Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.2** provides examples of primary school assembly items to promote a positive and supportive school culture. Secondary schools could support these assembly items through buddy programs with primary school students.
- **Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3** discusses peer support strategies which contribute to students' and staff perceptions of a supportive school environment. All students have a responsibility to take action to reduce and prevent bullying behaviour and supporting a positive school culture.
- **Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.4** builds on this premise by highlighting the important role of bystanders in bullying situations and ways they can take positive action.
- **Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.5** is included as an example of ways to encourage the development of positive social skills to build a supportive school culture.

Throughout this chapter, links have been made to toolkits featured in other chapters of this book. These links may further assist schools to build a more supportive school culture for the reduction and prevention of bullying behaviours.
Brief background to school initiative

This school developed a consultative process to help them to create a new policy on bullying and harassment.

School profile

- Metropolitan non-government boys school
- 1,210 students
- Years: K-12
- Education support school – catering for learning difficulties

Action

This school stated in its bullying policy that an aim of the school was to ‘...provide an environment in which each student is personally involved...’. To this end, they worked to establish a school community where everyone could feel valued and safe, and where individual differences are understood and celebrated. They communicated to the school community that every student had the right to enjoy their time at school and that the school community expects respect for others and does not tolerate bullying or harassment.

The school promoted an ethos that valued individual differences. Assemblies were used to validate students’ achievements. Modelling by staff and senior students was a valuable tool in promoting positive behaviour. An example of an activity that promoted leadership and positive role modelling was their Peer Support Program. The program integrated Year 1 students with Year 12 students during Physical Education Studies. Each Year 12 student was placed in charge of two Year 1 boys to teach them aquatic skills. The Year 12 students were externally examined on their teaching skills, with some attaining qualifications as swimming instructors for children at primary and secondary level. The Year 1 boys enhanced their swimming skills and made some ‘big friends’.

The tutor system promoted the development of individual and social skills. The school was divided into houses and within the houses were smaller vertically structured tutorial groups. Each tutorial group was made up of students from different year levels. The house system ensured that each student had a home base in the school and that there was at least one staff member who knew what was going on in their day to day life. Students kept a diary that was signed each week by the tutor and the student’s parents. This provided a line of communication between the students, their tutor and their parents. The groups provided senior students with the opportunity to show responsible stewardship and for juniors to learn from positive senior role models. Several other opportunities were provided to seniors to further develop their leadership skills. For example, there was an annual camp for newly appointed prefects, a training program for Peer Support scheme leaders and volunteer positions that assist in Year 8 camps. The Peer Support Program consisted of small groups of Year 8 students meeting with a trained Year 11 leader. The program built confidence and self-esteem, provided support for boys in their first year of secondary schooling, developed communications and relationship skills, and improved the students’ ability to resist harmful peer pressures and make responsible decisions.
Reports of being bullied were responded to with listening and empathy. Staff reinforced to students that they had done nothing wrong by talking about the situation. Staff then made a judgement as to whether the student required additional help (for example, counselling). Students who engage in bullying are directed to discussions with counsellors. These discussions focus on what they can do to change their behaviour. Parents are contacted to support the proposed changes.

The school views education as a partnership between a school and its student’s parents. Effort was taken to clearly explain to parents the expectations of the school regarding its students.

What we learnt

Difficulties encountered

A large number of the students’ fathers were brought up under a different system—one that included ‘tit for tat’ type retaliation. Many of the fathers felt that learning to ‘stand up for themselves’ was a necessary part of growing up. Thus, much of the bullying behaviour was perceived as a rite of passage, both for the person who bullied others and the person bullied. There was also a strong belief that ‘whatever you do, don’t dob on your mates’.

Overcoming difficulties

The school recognised these barriers and attempted to change them through the provision of knowledge. The school introduced the concept of bystander power to the students. The students were encouraged to participate and contribute to the anti-bullying policy.

Recommendations for other schools

Educate the staff, students and parents about the importance of anti-bullying policies.
Sample letter from school to parents and students

Dear parents and students,

It is not always easy to speak on behalf of the school and house prefects and all my fellow Year Twelves. On some topics it is very hard to find consensus of opinion.

However, on the issue of bullying and harassment there is unanimity of opinion. All seniors consider bullying in our school community to be totally unacceptable. They are glad that the issue is being aired. Furthermore, because sometimes it is difficult to be certain exactly what behaviour is acceptable, they are pleased that there are now clearer published definitions as well as guidelines, that will help everyone to handle the problem.

The issue of bullying prevention has been given a high profile in the school to raise awareness and in turn, to reduce its harm. We would like to make one point clear; the raising of awareness does not imply that there has been an increase in bullying. Rather, as one senior said during a long discussion of the issue late last year:

'It is not that there is more bullying, there is instead more caring about how it can be stopped.'

That is a positive sign. It is caring that will help us all build a more pleasant school community in the years ahead.

If anyone feels pressured they must talk to a teacher, a prefect or any senior student. Everybody is keen to help.

Yours sincerely

School Captain

More information about the strategies used by this school can be found in the following toolkits:

• Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.2
• Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3
• Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.4
• Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.4
• Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.5
• School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.2
• School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.3
Brief background to school initiative

This school helped students distinguish between telling and dobbing and upheld the motto: 'It's okay to tell'.

School profile

- Metropolitan co-ed government school
- 756 students
- Years: 8-12
- Very multicultural

Action

In their 'Stopping Bullying at School' pamphlet this school defined dobbing as telling on someone to deliberately get them into trouble, drawing attention to themself, acting helpless or make themself look good. Telling, on the other hand, is asking for support to solve a problem you have been unable to resolve yourself.

Staff were trained in the Method of Shared Concern, which involved interviewing all individuals engaged in bullying incidents, including bystanders. The idea was to increase the empathy of those engaging in bullying behaviour toward the students they bullied. Strategies were devised to change the behaviour and attitudes of those involved in bullying incidents. Follow-up meetings were held with all participants to ensure the situation had changed positively for the bullied student. Some students needed individual counselling to help develop self-protection and risk-minimisation strategies.

The 'Strong Schools' lessons were taught in Year 8 Studies of Society and Environment classes. This involved defining bullying behaviour, examining how it is a problem for the school, and answering the questions:

1. Why is bullying serious?
2. Why do students bully?
3. What can be done if you are bullied?
4. What does the school do about bullying?

The modules were taught in the form of class discussion and worksheets with interesting activities. The examples include both direct bullying, such as name-calling and physical bullying, and indirect bullying, such as exclusion.

The school also ran a Peer Support Program. Year 8 students were allocated a Year 11 buddy. The students volunteered for the program when they were in Year 10. If the response was too great, staff selected the students who would become the Peer Support Students. The Year 11s were trained by staff. After the two-day training, the Year 11s were matched up with a Year 8 student. The Year 11 buddies supported groups of Year 8s during class time (half an hour per week for an entire semester). This time was used for discussion, games (trust) and personal development.
What We Learnt

If we could do it over

The school would have liked to have adopted more of a whole-school approach.

Recommendations for other schools

Remain vigilant. Conduct regular ongoing awareness-raising activities with parents, students and teachers. Emphasise correct bystander behaviour.

More information about the strategies used by this school can be found in the following toolkits:

- Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3
- Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.3
- Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.1
- School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.2
- School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.3

School Story 2.3

Brief background to school initiative

Data collected by the school indicated that a social skills initiative was necessary. The teachers felt their students needed to understand that consequences for inappropriate behaviour were directed at their 'behaviour' and not at the child. Also the school experienced an influx of new teachers with skills in peer support. There was a realisation that the number of 15 to 25 year olds in the area was rapidly increasing, and thus the number of students would likely increase too. All these factors were taken into consideration when planning and implementing the bullying prevention strategies.

School profile

- Metropolitan government school
- 780 students
- Years: K-7

Action

Input for the bullying prevention plan was received from both the staff and a student cohort. When revising the plan the school organised 'parent coffee chats' to discuss the proposed changes. If parents were unable to attend these chats they were sent an A4 size flyer outlining the changes.

The school organised a collaborative problem solving team. The problem solving team consisted of one administration representative, three teachers (one male, two female) from pre-primary, Year 4 and Year 7. Teachers who experienced difficulties in the classroom approached the problem solving team to discuss the issue. The group discussed the problem and suggested potential strategies and methods for its resolution.
The teachers and the problem solving team also approached parents to discuss such situations and how they could assist in the reduction of the problem.

The school introduced a Climate Committee which involved the students and teachers. The committee ran regular features in the school newsletter, organised activities for 'Kindness Week', and organised a time capsule (that is to be opened in 25 years). The committee was set up with the help of the Lions Quest International. They aided in the production of some books and provided staff training. This involved a two-day professional development program, Skills for Working with Adolescents, which was paid for by the Life Skills Committee of the local council. In the first year the training was only available to staff and in the second year parents were also able to attend. Additional staff training was provided by the Centre for Adolescent Mental Health and the school psychologist. The presentations discussed issues for adolescents (peer pressure, bullying) and their effects on students.

Classroom strategies included discussions, role-play and creative writing. For lower primary students the period after lunch was used to sit in a circle and discuss what had happened in the playground, how it made others feel and how things could be improved. Upper primary students also conducted discussion groups, where they used examples from the media to discuss issues related to bullying and harassment. Teachers used drama, health and language to act out and discuss issues of bullying without directly focusing on issues within the classroom.

The school established a student council and a peer support program. Year 7 students chosen as peer supporters were given a whole day of training. It was held outside the school and students learnt skills such as negotiation, assertiveness and team building through a variety of games and activities. At every lunch and recess break two peer supporters patrolled the playground and resolved problems that were brought to them by other students.

The school has conducted several evaluation surveys. Both the peer supports and parents were surveyed in relation to all of the actions that the school has implemented throughout the school year. Staff meetings were held once a term to discuss issues relating to any of the programs and activities that. If any changes were implemented they were advertised in the school newsletter.

What we learnt

Difficulties encountered

One of the main difficulties the school experienced was the mismatched expectations of parents compared to overall school expectations.

Overcoming difficulties

Lots of talking and meetings were held with parents. One strategy used to help parents realise the true actions of their children in school, was to talk to parents on the phone before students had a chance to get home and lie to parents to avoid punishment. Parents are reluctant to believe the school's side of events if it means believing their child has lied.

If we could do it over

The school realised the need to focus on consequences for behaviour, not punishment of the child. It is important to understand that you're not going to get rid of all bullying; support is the most important thing. Documentation is also helpful to remind parents of past discussions and actions taken.
Recommendations for other schools

Everyone must be involved and consistent if the program is to work. The school believes that bullying should be looked at under the umbrella of pastoral care, as opposed to behaviour management.

Next steps

The school plans for their newly set up Behaviour Management Committee to review their hierarchy of consequences. The Climate Committee will also include students next year.

More information about the strategies used by this school can be found in the following toolkits:

- Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.1
- Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3
- Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.5
- Proactive Policies and Practices Toolkit 3.5
- Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.1
- Key Understandings and Competencies Toolkit 4.2
- School-Family-Community Partnerships Toolkit 6.5
This toolkit contains a number of brief social and emotional messages in the form of newsletter items that can be used in the school’s communication to families and other school community members. These are designed to give families information about actions that can be taken to enhance students’ social skills and reduce student bullying. These messages can also be presented at assemblies to reiterate the school’s commitment to encouraging positive social behaviours and discouraging bullying.

**Aims of the newsletter items:**

1. Introduce your school’s goals and actions for creating a friendly school.
2. Encourage families to help to create a supportive school culture.
3. Provide families with a definition of bullying.
4. Provide families with a definition of cyberbullying.
5. Provide families with strategies they can use to help their children if they are being bullied or cyberbullied.
6. Provide families with tips to communicate more effectively with their children about bullying.
7. Help families to teach their children how to respond if they are being bullied at school.
8. Provide practical strategies families can use to discourage their children from bullying others.
9. Provide families with information about bystander roles and responsibilities.
10. Provide strategies for families to effectively support their children if they are being bullied at school.
11. Provide families with a rationale for the school’s response to bullying incidents.
12. Provide families with an understanding of the Method of Shared Concern in managing bullying incidents and how it works.
13. Provide families with practical strategies to support the school to reduce bullying.
14. Discuss the importance of discipline in resolving bullying behaviours, and to provide strategies for families to adopt at home.
15. Provide families with strategies to help their children develop and maintain friendships to reduce the likelihood they will be bullied at school.
16. Provide families with strategies to help them support their children if they are cyberbullied.
17. Provide families with strategies they can take to save and report evidence of cyberbullying.
18. Provide families with strategies to help them support their children to be safer when online.

An electronic copy of the newsletter items in this toolkit is available on the CD accompanying this book.
Assemblies are a time when the whole-school community (including families) come together to celebrate and discuss issues that concern the whole-school. They provide the ideal platform to convey consistent messages about the school’s behavior expectations policy and responses to bullying behaviours.

The assembly item examples provided in this toolkit offer your school examples of the types of activities that can be used during primary school assemblies to promote messages that encourage supportive social behaviour and discourage bullying, and to promote the rights and responsibilities of all members of the school community.

To create a positive, empathetic culture at your school aimed at reducing bullying behaviours on and offline, focus discussion topics at assemblies on:

- sharing
- respect
- cooperation
- friendship
- positive recognition of achievements (academic and non-academic)
- rights and responsibilities of all school members
- social skills.

Some ways to incorporate these messages into whole-school assembly discussions include:

- assigning a theme for each assembly (based on weekly values)
- school leaders acknowledging positive behaviour and encouraging the rights and responsibilities of all students
- focusing on the rights and responsibilities of all students, both online and offline
- asking student representatives to describe times they have witnessed students displaying positive behaviours in the schoolyard.
Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.3
Peer Support

Peer support initiatives help senior students and staff to address issues affecting all students in a positive and productive manner. A training and supervision program enables senior students to develop their capacity to act as peer supporters.

What is peer support?
Peer support strategies are based on the premise that young people, especially adolescents, seek out other young people for support and advice when they are experiencing some concern or worry, especially when they are cyberbullied.

Peer supporters are not professional counsellors or therapists; they are young people who offer supervised support to other young people. They need to be trained to provide a non-judgemental, active approach to listening which encourages others to express and explore their feelings or concerns.

How can peer supporters help?
Peer supporters may be involved in:
- helping younger students with learning
- helping younger or new students make the transition to a new school
- assisting with bringing concerns of students to a teacher’s attention
- assisting students by listening in a non-judgemental way.

Peer supporters have the potential to be successful as many students feel more comfortable talking to an older peer about being bullied (especially cyberbullying) than a teacher. They also promote prosocial behaviours which positively influence the social environment of the school and reduce bullying.

Peer supporters do however, need to have:
- suitable training
- strong links to the school’s pastoral care programs
- whole-staff support and action.

Identifying peer supporters
The selection of peer supporters is the most important step in the establishment of such a program. Research suggests that students be selected by students (vetted by teachers) from varying year groups, so the general population of students has a range of supporters who they may feel comfortable talking with.

Some schools have used existing school leaders to be peer supporters. These students may not be the most appropriate choice as they are typically high achievers and may be perceived by students as ‘good students’ who may not represent the cross-section of students at the school.
**Training of peer supporters**

Students should be trained—ideally by a counsellor or other qualified person—and have the opportunity to practise:

- active listening skills
- problem solving approaches
- empathy building
- acceptance of others
- showing respect for those who talk to them
- processes at the school for accessing help or progressing complaints/problems (such as what to do if a student is extremely upset or in need of help)
- listening in a non-judgemental way and providing students with the correct processes or staff to assist them
- the need for confidentiality
- record keeping.

**How does the program work?**

Students who have been selected and trained as peer supporters should be identified to the whole-school community. These students must be known by their peers if they are to be accessed for support.

There are many ways in which the role of peer supporters can be used.

- Being informally present every day in the schoolyard in an unofficial capacity, unless approached by another student; while other peer supporters can be available at a ‘drop-in’ room where students can speak with them in private. This ‘drop-in’ room may be seen by students as a possible way to discuss challenges without being noticed by their school peers.
- Being responsible for showing new students around the campus during break times, and generally looking out for them by making sure they have other students to play or sit with. This process provides new students with familiar and safe students they can go to if they feel alone or isolated during break times, and can reduce the likelihood of being bullied.
- Having a regular spot at assemblies to discuss peer supporters’ roles and the rights and responsibilities of each member of the school community.

Assign a duty teacher the task of providing assistance to the peer supporters.
Keeping it successful

While peer support programs have been used successfully in schools, there are common issues which can threaten the integrity or existence of the program including:

- peer supporters clearly understanding the boundaries of their role. Staff are responsible for ensuring these boundaries are observed, particularly if peer supporters begin providing advice beyond the scope of their brief and training
- training of peer supporters to be thorough and ongoing. Training needs to be provided by staff with advanced skills in the fields of communication, behaviour management and counselling, with regular follow-up or booster trainings linked to specific needs
- whole-staff support for the peer supporters must be consistent, highly visible and ongoing.

Further reading:


Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.4
Bystanders – an important group

What is a bystander?

A bystander is someone who sees the bullying situation but is not the person being bullied or who is bullying others. Bystanders may act in many different ways, including:

• watching what is going on and not getting involved
• pretending not to see and ignoring the situation
• choosing to get involved in the bullying
• choosing to get involved and stop the bullying
• choosing to get help.

As bystanders, children can either support bullying in the way they behave, or help to stop bullying. Many children don’t know how to help or how to get help.

Talking with children about bystanders

Bullying can sometimes be made worse if children don’t know what to do or who to turn to for help. School staff and parents can help by offering to talk and providing support. Everyone needs to take responsibility and respond to bullying behaviour by not remaining silent, but instead talking about the issue.

When some children were asked what stops them from helping other children who are bullied, the most common answers were: ‘It’s none of my business’ and ‘I didn’t want to get involved’.

Yet when asked if they wanted to stop the bullying, most children said, ‘Yes, I don’t like to see people being bullied’. These children don’t like the bullying but are not sure if they should help and are unsure what to do to help the person being bullied.

What can bystanders do?

If children see someone being bullied they could:

• let the person doing the bullying know that what they are doing is bullying
• refuse to join in with the bullying and walk away
• support the student who is being bullied
• ask a teacher or support person for help
• support their friends and protect them from bullying by being there for them. Children who are alone are more likely to be the target of bullying so encourage children to be aware of other children who are left out or who are on their own in the schoolyard.
School staff and parents can support children by:

1. discussing bullying (stories in books or on television can trigger discussion about bullying situations)
2. listening to their children’s point of view on the topic of bullying
3. helping their children to discuss solutions and consequences to problems they see or are involved in (decision-making)
4. problem solving as a whole class or family. This can help children feel valued and supported as well as make other class and family members aware of problems and solutions
5. providing advice on what might happen as a result of bullying and why it is important to tell someone
6. developing a clear class and family policy that ‘put downs’ are not okay
7. helping children to understand the problem of bullying and showing empathy and understanding of how people might feel if they are bullied.

Sometimes children find themselves in a position of being a bystander to their friend or friends bullying others. They will be torn between what they believe is the right thing to do, and supporting their friends.

**Peer influence**

Being part of a group offers security and a feeling of belonging. Children learn about social skills and relationships by being part of a group. Sometimes children can feel influenced by the group to do things or behave in ways that they do not agree with or feel comfortable with.

**How can school staff and parents help children to understand peer influence?**

Explain to children:
- it is good to have friends and be part of a group
- peers can sometimes try to persuade others to follow a decision that they may not agree with
- you can say ‘no’ to your friends and still be friends (see possible responses).

Training in assertive responses can also help children resist pressure and respond in ways that do not promote bullying (see Supportive School Culture Toolkit 2.5).

If a student wants another student to do something that they don’t want to do, that student may use some powerful persuaders:
- threatening to ‘not be friends anymore’
- calling names, e.g. *chicken, wimp*
- physical threats
- rejection from the group.
Activity: Possible Responses to Powerful Persuaders in Bullying Situations

You can role-play some pressure situations with children to practise possible responses, for example, staff/parent role-plays another child trying to get someone to do something they don’t want to do.

Parent: Let’s tease [student’s name] about his new haircut.

Ask students to think of a possible response to let the person know they don’t want to do this. If they can’t think of something to say, help them to find a possible response from the following list.

Have students try practising some of these responses to a bullying situation. After a bit of practice, students will find it easier to think of their own responses and will look and sound more confident when they speak.

General

• I don’t want to do it.
• I don’t believe in bullying.
• I don’t see the point in hurting other people.
• Bullying is wrong.
• The more friends we have the better.
• I am not going to help you bully someone.
• How would you feel if someone did that to you?

Leaving someone out

• Why not just let them join in?
• I don’t see the need to make someone feel bad.
• I don’t want to be mean to someone, that’s not fair.
• Why can’t we all be friends?

Teasing

• I don’t think it is fair to tease someone about that.
• I don’t like to call people mean names.
• I would feel terrible if someone did that to me so I am not going to do it.
• Teasing people is not fun.

Threatening

• I don’t want to be involved in this.
• Threatening people is wrong.
Gossip/tumours

• How do you know this story is true?
• That is probably gossip.
• I don’t want to be involved in spreading gossip.

Physical

• I don’t want to be involved in fighting.
• I’ve got something else on at that time.
• I don’t see the point in hurting someone.

During this activity students quickly realise that a person who pressures them to do something they don’t want to do is not behaving as a friend should. Friends accept their friends’ decisions and don’t try to pressure them to do something they feel uncomfortable about.
Assertiveness training has been shown to increase self-esteem and confidence in a person being bullied. A person who has good self-esteem and confidence is less likely to be bullied.

What is assertiveness?

Being assertive is about saying what you think, feel and want in a confident way and protecting your own rights while not infringing on the rights of others. It means saying what you want without shouting, glaring, being angry or putting others down. It also means saying what you want without putting yourself down or letting others make you feel bad.

Assertive students:

- can express their feelings calmly and are able to work out when it is the right time to do this
- can accept feedback from others
- are able to protect themselves without being hurtful to other students
- are able to ask for help when they have difficulty dealing with a situation themselves
- act with self-respect and confidence.

The assertive response is 'just right' (not too hard and not too soft).

- Speak in a firm but friendly way.
- Stand tall, make eye contact.
- Stand up for yourself politely.
- Smile or look calm.
- Feel positive, confident and in control.
- Feel okay about yourself.

How can school staff and parents talk to their children about dealing with arguments?

Explain that everyone has arguments sometimes. Arguing with somebody doesn’t necessarily mean that you don’t like the person or that it is the end of the friendship. Point out that in arguments both people think they are right.
What tips can I give students to help them deal with arguments?

- Try to stay calm and talk through the problem using a normal voice.
- If either person is getting too angry or upset, say, ‘We are getting too angry/upset. Let’s talk about this later.’ Then walk away.
- Make sure you do talk about it later when you have both calmed down.
- Point out your view and talk about your feelings (for example, ‘I felt bad when you told the rest of the team I was useless at baseball’).
- Let the other person explain their point of view. Listen without interrupting.
- Apologise if necessary and try to find a way to be friends.