

## **Barriers to Safe Learning Environments**

*The following material was presented to the Safe Schools, Safe Communities Expo - Countering Bullying, Harassment, Homophobia and Violence in Schools panel by Susan Rockliff, Administration Officer of P&C Council*

These are some of the barriers to creating and sustaining safe and supportive learning environments.

One of the strongest emotions a parent will experience is the anger and upset felt when a child is bullied or hurt. This is why we care so much about creating safe learning environments for our children.

### **The message doesn't reach the provinces**

Parents have found that individual schools don't all subscribe to strong policy statements produced by the Department. Parents have expressed frustration about the lack of a consistent response to bullying, harassment and violence across the system and see this as one of the disadvantages of self-managing schools.

### **Denial**

Staff, parent community and principal levels denial of the existence of bullying, harassment and violence often exists. Some parents feel that this stance is taken because to acknowledge the problem might involve taking responsibility for it at some level. School leadership is vital.

### **Blaming the victim**

There have been examples of the victims of bullying being blamed for not standing up to intimidation, or somehow encouraging abuse. The comments, "Kids are like that" or "Kids can be cruel" are sometimes used as excuses for destructive, harmful behaviour.

In order for victims to regain control over their lives, they sometimes need to be supported by informed and caring people who can suggest alternatives. The incidence of domestic violence is another example of victims apparently putting up with intolerable abuse. The remedy is similar also.

### **Home-grown attitudes**

Schools are populated by students who come from a wide range of domestic situations, some of which tolerate verbal, emotional, physical, racial and gender abuse as quite acceptable expressions of family functioning. This makes the involvement of the parent community even more essential – and problematical – in creating safe schools. Somehow, without judging families or individuals, schools have to make sure the key principles of safe schools are proclaimed and defended.

### **Demands on schools are enormous and increasing**

There are pressures from all sides to improve academic and vocational education for students, especially in the current context of continual testing. However, as someone said, students don't learn if they feel threatened. Social and academic learning must go together. Schools must be provided with resources to properly cater for this aspect of their work.

### **Walking the talk**

At every level in the school community, the rhetoric must be supported by practice. Much bullying goes on in the Australian workplace, and we should not therefore be surprised to find it amongst the professional staff of schools.

Until fairly recently, (UN Rights of the Child) it was quite acceptable to bully children. Now it is more covert. Children often say about some teachers that they are completely different when dealing with adults. Why do we still think we can treat children however we like?

### **Territorialism**

This occurs when people find reasons why cooperating with other community agencies or departments is "impossible". Another manifestation is the development of a policy by "experts" which tends to devalue or ignore the potential contribution of non-professionals.

In 1998 I became aware of a very successful program developed by the Victorian Parenting Centre designed to help children and adolescents exhibiting extreme violence or withdrawn anxious behaviour develop other strategies to cope. Part of the program's success was due to the requirement that parents also attend the intensive weekly sessions. The difficulty in getting education and health professionals in Tasmania to work together to enable this program to be implemented was almost overwhelming. Where it was offered to students and their families, it was due to the determination of individuals to overcome administrative obstacles and make it happen.

### **Lack of follow-through and refreshing of purpose**

Perhaps the most important barrier is provided by the human experience of time. eg "We did bullying in 2000 so therefore it's handled". The fact is that we are an evolving species, and one day we may transcend these behaviours, but we haven't reached that point. Somewhere in the school list of priorities there has to be a reminder to review the implementation of the Anti-harassment policy at regular intervals. Whilst individual cases must be handled appropriately and swiftly, there needs to be ongoing monitoring of the school environment to ensure safety for all.

### **Resourcing**

Lack of appropriate personnel means that well-intentioned initiatives are not followed up and momentum is lost. P&C Council has stressed the need for more welfare officers in schools, in recognition that social problems cannot be ignored by schools. Teachers may not have the skills, let alone the energy and time, to make them a focus of their work.

### **Aversion to school**

A factor which makes community involvement difficult is that some parents avoid contact with schools, often as a result of their own experiences as students. You have to be particularly committed and creative in order to involve these parents. Perhaps a parent employed as a Home School Liaison Officer, more able to meet parents on their own terms, is a possible solution.

### **Communication**

Everyone in the school community must know that bullying and harassment is intolerable (including some groundsman!) and also be aware of the consequences that will inevitably confront any perpetrator. Give the parent of every enrolling student copies of relevant policies, with clear instructions about what to do when problems arise.

A survey referred to in one of the ACSSO publications revealed that for 1,000 parents in the Sydney area the four most important qualities they wanted their children to acquire from schooling were: the ability to think for him- or herself; self-confidence, happiness, and to be well balanced. (IMPACT, Journal of the Australian Council of Social Services, February 1992.)

These outcomes are achieved through successful learning of both the curriculum, and how to enjoy relating to others.

*Susan Rockliff*

For further information on bullying: [www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying](http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying)

## **Key Principles of Creating Safe School Environments**

1. All members of the school community have the right to be in a safe and supportive environment.
2. Policies, practices and programs should:
  - reflect this aim
    - be evolving and dynamic
    - be developed by the community
    - respect cultural diversity
    - be adequately resourced
    - be widely promoted, communicated and accessible
3. Policies, practices and programs should be developed by parents, students and staff working together.
4. All members of the school community should be empowered to share the responsibility of achieving the agreed goals.
5. Professional counsellors and facilities must be in place to support all members of the school community.
6. The school community should endeavour to work closely with other community agencies.

Taken from *Creating Safe and Supportive Learning Environments: What's working in Australian schools*

(Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO, 1998)