

## **New Tactics to Deal with Schoolyard Bully**

**An ANU academic has endorsed a new approach to deal with school bullies.**

Dr Brenda Morrison, a Post-Doctorate Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences, has suggested that schools introduce “restorative justice” methods to deal with bullying.

“Restorative justice is about building communities of care around individuals while not condoning harmful behaviour – in other words holding individuals accountable for their actions,” Dr Morrison said.

Dr Morrison presented her work in a report to a UNESCO conference on “Violence in Schools and Public Policies” in Paris this month. She was the only Australian delegate among representatives from 36 countries.

“What I have done really acknowledges the importance of affect in the maintenance of social relations and particularly the role of shame,” she said.

Last year Dr Morrison, who is based in the Centre for Restorative Justice, worked with 30 students in an ACT school to develop a “Responsible Citizenship Program” (RCP).

To design the RCP, Dr Morrison built upon the research of a former RSSS PhD student, Dr Eliza Ahmed, who found that a significant contributor to bullying behaviour was shame.

“If kids do not handle their shame well – and that goes for victims and bullies alike – they are more likely to bully or be bullied,” Dr Morrison said.

She said shame emerged in people when they behaved inappropriately in a community of support such as their school or family. By taking responsibility for their actions, they acknowledged and overcame their shame. She said internalised shame could become a living time bomb for individuals and communities.

“Part of my work is finding the balance between rationality and emotions, and building cooperative relations in schools.”

“Firstly I created a caring environment for the children by teaching respect, consideration and participation in the school. We got the fifth grade students to think about the things that made up responsible citizenship in their school,” Dr Morrison said.

She addressed the children as a group to avoid singling out individual students.

“Secondly, we asked the group how they would resolve conflict productively,” she said. “We demonstrated how to deal with shame, how to repair the harm done from conflict, take responsibility for actions, expect the best from and care for others. ”

When instances of bullying occurred, Dr Morrison advocated restorative conferences between the bully and the victim. Both sides invited people to support them such as a parent, teacher or a friend.

“It is important to involve the bully and the victim because they both feel shame in different ways,” she said. “The conferences helped the children involved to understand

what had happened, the effect it had and what needed to be done.”

Dr Morrison said bullying was usually a symptom of a bigger problem and a way in which some children tried to express themselves.

“When a child is given a respected voice within the community, they will find it harder to abuse it,” she said.

She said violence in schools was becoming increasingly recognised as a social-justice and public-health problem because it affected victims, offenders and their communities.

“Bullies are more likely to drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol and engage in subsequent delinquent and criminal behaviour,” she said.

“Children who are bullied have higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, illness and suicidal tendency. For both (the victim and the bully), fear becomes an obstacle to learning, self-development and effective citizenship.”

Dr Morrison said that, in the long term, bullies continued to impose aggressive and dominating personalities in the wider community and victims carried the burden of self-criticism and perpetual “victim hood”.

Her research has already struck a chord with ACT school administrators.

After she addressed a conference of deputy-principals in Canberra last year, the Act Department of Education offered training in restorative practices to its schools. She is now evaluating the work they have done.

*Leigh Baker, ANU Reporter 30 March 2001 Vol. 32, No.4*