



Observations of an Ordinary Bloke – ON BULLYING

By Ken Marslew AM

Bullying in schools is not the tip of the iceberg, it is part of 'what lies beneath'. The real tip of the iceberg is the increased level of violence that appears to be happening across society, across the world – road rage, trolley rage, queue rage, levels of assault, increased levels of domestic violence. Bullying is the precursor to this epidemic. How bullying is dealt with in its early stages will have a long-term impact on society.

What does the term bullying mean?

The Australian Concise Oxford dictionary defines it as follows:

- A person who uses strength and power to coerce others by fear
 - To persecute or oppress by force or threat
 - Pressure to coerce others to do something
- The author's interpretation:
- To intentionally hurt others physically and or emotionally by words and actions

It is the interpretation of what bullying is that firstly allows the identification of the challenges and then the development and application of solutions. Without wanting to overlook specific issues, this article takes a broad-brush approach.

Boys are raised to be warriors, in the sense that society tends to develop their maleness and encourages them to defend themselves, their families and their loved ones. There may be a tendency to exhibit aggression when a challenge is made to the beliefs they have formed.

The majority of a child's habits are formed before they are five years old, so the role of parents and family is huge. Negative experiences and exposure to inappropriate behaviour during these formative years can have a lifelong effect on a child's behaviour. Parents, particularly young people and first timers, may require assistance in understanding their role as a parent. They may not have had good experiences or guidance when they were young, which may affect their parenting skills today.

"The apple does not fall far from the tree." Many parents do not understand the importance of their behaviour in the development of their child's behaviour. The stress of a lifestyle, work-related issues, abuse of drugs and alcohol or emotional

instability, all affect a young one's behaviour. Unfortunately, some parents do not know or do not care. Kids often listen and mimic good or bad behaviour from their role models, and in the first instance, that is family.

My personal experience is that I have seen very young children, two and three-year-olds, exhibit bullying behaviour, only to hear parents say, "She is just like her mother", "There is a strong character" and "They certainly will get on in the world." They do not deal with what is obviously going to be a challenge in the future. I have also witnessed how some parents behave at junior sport – scary stuff – where instead of encouraging sport to be a form of exercise, they may push their children too hard and aggression appears.

Bullying behaviour is evident at a very early age. Some parents may not want to recognize this in their children; others even encourage it. When a child finally makes it to kindergarten and then primary school, teachers and carers are confronted with this sometimes unacceptable behaviour. Note that this article does not highlight behavioral problems resulting from recognized disorders; there is a range of programs available for those specific issues, beyond the range of normal teachers and carers.

How is bullying dealt with?

- Make a contract with parents to assist in the development of their child/children. Parents must take at least part ownership of their child's behaviour
- Participate in early intervention programs dealing with emotional management and relationships. There are wonderful play programs that incorporate those philosophies in an age appropriate language, including art and music
- Playing with animals will help develop humanity with young ones and will assist with non-verbal communication skills
- Encourage parents to join parenting skills programs and emotional management programs to help them develop their parenting and life skills
- Encourage teachers and carers to be mindful of their own mental health issues and ensure they partake in regular supervision sessions and personal development courses. Vicarious

trauma (compassion fatigue) may cause a range of issues that could cause burn out and an inability to deal with parents and children to produce positive outcomes

It may be possible to impact positively on bullying behaviour of a child, but it is essential to also attempt to have an impact on the environment that generated that behaviour. Parents must be reminded that they have a responsibility to address their children's behaviors, for example, by:

- Role modeling their behaviours in front of children
- Involving their children – talking to them, reading stories to them
- Ensuring television programs and material they are exposed to is in their child's best interests
- Keep in mind the older the child gets the harder it is to change behaviour.

As a child gets older, there are additional factors that come into play, even more so than in those very early years. Cultural issues (some cultures create differing levels of respect for members of the community), sometimes ethnicity, and religion may cause challenges. There is a tendency to dance around these issues for fear of being seen as discriminatory. A good anti-bullying strategy will be clear and effective, irrespective of cultural issues even though there will be attempts to manipulate the system. There needs to be one policy for all, "bullying is bullying". Whatever is tolerated will keep happening.

The other culture that becomes evident is the culture of violence, particularly in sport. Violence, drugs, alcohol, sex scandals, all from our sporting heroes. This is also evident in movies, videos, TV programs and the words in some songs. There is a constant erosion of community values and making a stand can be difficult. Sometimes the hardest thing to do and the right thing to do is the same thing.

Drugs and alcohol also begin to enter the picture and make dealing with bullying even more difficult. One of the most insidious illicit drugs is marijuana. It is being sold to young people as a soft drug; it is not. It is a gateway drug and it is addictive and destructive. Information on this drug is readily available everyone should educate themselves, it is a big part of the problem.

And now for 'cyber bullying – the use of