





BULLYING REMAINS A REMARKABLY CONSTANT PROBLEM IN SCHOOLS AND VIRTUALLY ALL STUDENTS WORRY ABOUT IT, BUT A PROGRAM CALLED ACTING AGAINST BULLYING IS PROVING TO BE A SUCCESSFUL WAY OF, WELL, ACTING AGAINST BULLYING, AS BRUCE BURTON EXPLAINS.

Despite 20 years of efforts worldwide to address bullying, research shows that levels of school bullying remain remarkably constant, and that virtually all students worry about bullying. The majority of parents in Australia identify it as the most important issue in education for them – more important than academic results.

Two approaches to dealing with bullying with which I've been involved have been successful in helping schools, teachers, parents and students to manage the problem: Acting Against Bullying and Bullyfree TV.

Acting Against Bullying is a major, evidence-based program for bullying management that uses techniques that have been trialled and refined over more than a decade in Australia, the United Kingdom and Sweden. It has been implemented in hundreds of schools with tens of thousands of students. The program uses a combination of two key strategies: drama and peer teaching. It operates as a whole school program, with every student actively involved, and within the normal curriculum. The effect is to give students at every year level of primary and secondary schooling both an understanding of what bullying is, and the skills to deal with bullying in their own lives. This empowerment of students as individuals can then transform the culture of the whole school.

The use of drama to explore bullying by acting out a whole range of bullying scenarios allows students to create and experiment with realistic models of bullying, including ones drawn from their own lives, which are 'made safe' by being altered and made fictional. This use of drama has been extremely effective in providing students with the opportunity to learn and apply a range of strategies in dealing with bullying. Students themselves have said they prefer the use of drama to other approaches in anti-bullying programs.

There is considerable evidence worldwide that peer teaching by students can be a powerful way for them to enhance their learning, but it's seldom used in normal curriculum teaching. The Acting Against Bullying program, however, has demonstrated that teenagers can take responsibility for learning themselves, and



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teach younger students how to address the problem of bullying with considerable understanding and skill. Thousands of young people have achieved this in the Acting Against Bullying program, when given the chance to so.

The program begins at senior level, usually a Year 11 Drama, Health Education or English class. The students are taught about the range and contexts of bullying behaviour, and are given a clear conceptual background to help them understand and deal with the problem. This includes the fact that there are three escalating stages to bullying – latent, emerging and manifest. The roles of the parties involved are explored – the bully, the bullied and the bystander – and their behaviour investigated, especially the bystander, who has the most power to act to deal with bullying.

This conceptual background is taught through drama, which means that situations can be acted out that show bullying behaviour, but the emotions remain unthreatening, and the participants are always in control. It's important to remember that drama is imaginative enactment, where students can explore any experience safely by pretending it's real while knowing it's fictional.

Once they are confident in their understanding of bullying and have developed strategies to deal with it, senior students work in groups and use the same approach to teach classes of younger students. The peer teaching allows the older students to reinforce their own knowledge. The younger students appreciate being taught by students they look up to and whom they know to have survived their own kinds of bullying. These younger students then teach classes of students younger than themselves, down into primary school, and right down to Year 2 or 3.

The Acting Against Bullying program has been integrated into a range of curriculum areas including Humanities or Human Society and its Environment, Health Education, English and Drama. Where the program is

supported and permeates a whole school, the culture of that school can actually change – with students more conscious of relationships and supportive of each other, and empowered because they have strategies for action.

How effective is the program? The research I conducted three years after implementation of the program in a number of Queensland schools in partnership with Education Queensland produced clear evidence of the program's effectiveness. Of the students involved in the program, 97 per cent were able to identify the three stages; 87 per cent stated they were more able to recognise when bullying was taking place, and 87 per cent believed that bullying could be de-escalated or stopped, while 64 per cent believed they were more likely to respond to de-escalate or end bullying, with 33 per cent unsure and only three per cent responding negatively. Overall, 70 per cent believed they had learned to manage bullying situations better, and most believed that bystanders had the most real power to ameliorate bullying.

Further extensive evidence showed that more than 50 per cent of the students were in fact using what they had learned in real life conflicts; and a number of genuine life changes were identified and followed. More than 80 per cent of the teachers believed the program should be incorporated permanently in their schools.

Bullyfree TV is a recent and innovative approach to helping parents and children to understand more about bullying, and offers a range of strategies for families to deal with it together. Created by TV producer and presenter Tony Johnston and filmed on DVD, it brings together three leading experts in bullying in Australia in a TV studio to answer a wide range of questions about bullying from their own successful work in the field. The questions are posed both by Tony Johnston and by an audience of parents and children, many of whom have suffered from serious bullying at school.

The DVD contains two-and-a-half hours' worth of information, guidance and advice,



and offers a range of strategies to parents, students and teachers to deal with bully-

ing. Professor Donna Cross from Western Australia's Edith Cowan University focuses in particular on her research into cyber-bullying, and provides advice and strategies for dealing with this new manifestation of bullying. Dr Andrew Fuller from the University of Melbourne discusses his extensive work in assisting both bullies and children who were bullied to deal with the consequences of their experiences. My contribution is to explain how parents and teachers can apply the techniques developed for Acting Against Bullying not only in the classroom, but also in the home to manage and prevent bullying.

Bullyfree TV has already shown itself to be valuable in assisting teachers and parents to understand bullying better and to help children when they become involved in bullying. A leading private school in Brisbane has purchased enough copies of the DVD to distribute one to every parent of a child in their school.

Bullying is a major problem in schools,

but there are programs and techniques that have been developed that are evidence based and do work to reduce both the incidence and severity of bullying. Acting Against Bullying and Bullyfree TV are two particularly successful examples. **T**

Bruce Burton is Professor of Applied Theatre in the Faculty of Education at Griffith University, Brisbane, and is the Director of the Acting Against Bullying program. He is the author of eight books, and has a lifetime's experience in teaching, theatre practice and research. He was awarded the 2007 National Excellence in University Teaching Award for the Arts and Humanities.

LINKS:

For more on Bullyfree TV, visit www.bullyfree.com.au

For more on the Friendly Schools & Families Program of Donna Cross from Edith Cowan University, visit www.friendlyschools.com.au