Consultations with children and young people about bullying – Report of findings

Summary of findings

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People undertook focus groups with 157 children and young people in schools and youth organisations across NSW. They were asked three key questions:

1. What does bullying mean to you?
2. What are the locations where bullying happens?
3. What are the best ways to stop bullying?

Key findings

Children and young people understand bullying to be physical, verbal, emotional and relational and that it happens in person and online. Children and young people also describe bullying as a repetitive behaviour that causes victims to feel worthless and depressed.

When asked where bullying occurs, children and young people reported that it occurs everywhere; both in public and private. Specific places mentioned where face to face bullying occurs were school, work, parks, sporting fields, at home, university and places with no supervision. Children and young people also discussed bullying occurring online via social media platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Children and young people offered a range of ways to prevent or reduce bullying:

Children and young people's recommendations

- Children and young people want parents to be more involved in their lives
- Remove the stigma that boys cannot talk about their emotions
- Teachers should not show favouritism towards some students – treat all students equally
- Teachers should intervene more often – don't pretend it's not happening
- Create a stop bullying campaign
- More anti-bullying programs in schools
- Harsher consequences for those who bully others
- 24/7 helplines for children and young people who are experiencing bullying

These findings were confirmed through an online poll of 1,000 children and young people across NSW.

Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People
Ground Floor, 219-241 Cleveland Street, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012
ABN 80 597 369 676 | 02 9248 0970 | acyp@acyp.nsw.gov.au | acyp.nsw.gov.au

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Methodology

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) adopted a two-stage approach to gather children and young people's views on bullying:

Stage 1: Focus groups

ACYP undertook 22 focus groups with children and young people in schools and youth organisations across metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW.

In total, 166 children and young people aged 8-18 years (45 males and 121 females) took part in the discussions, which centred around three key questions:

1. What does bullying mean to you?
2. What are the locations where bullying happens?
3. What are the best ways to stop bullying?

Stage 2: Online poll

In Stage 2, ACYP conducted an online poll of 1,000 children and young people aged 12-24 years across NSW. The questionnaire included 30 questions in relation to bullying. Findings in relation to the following questions are presented in this report as they were used as a comparison with the focus group findings:

1. What does the word 'bullying' mean to you?
2. Where do you feel the most bullying occurs?
3. What actions are working well to address bullying in your school/TAFE/university/ workplace?
4. What else do you think your school/TAFE/university/workplace could be doing to address bullying that would make a difference?

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Stage 1 findings: Focus groups

What does bullying mean to you?

When asked to describe what bullying means to them, children and young people articulated that it is physical, verbal, emotional and relational and that it happens in person and online.

They reported that bullies make fun of people's cultures and physical appearance such as looks, clothing, weight and height.

> "Peer pressure; physical violence; making fun of things like weight, skin colour, height; giving dirty looks; spreading rumours; name calling and posting threatening social media."

Young people discussed the idea that bullying is about power; with the bully often pressuring others to gang up on victims. Children and young people discussed that this happens because the bully is often jealous and insecure:

> "Bullies are insecure about themselves and therefore need to make themselves feel significant."

Children and young people also spoke about the repetitive nature of bullying and of not being able to escape the situation. They discussed that this can have long-lasting effects; including victims feeling worthless and depressed. Some groups linked bullying to self-harm and even suicide.

What are the locations where bullying happens?

Children and young people reported that bullying occurs everywhere; both in public and private. School was mentioned most frequently; with young people listing the playground, classroom and school toilets as the most common places. Other locations repeatedly reported were friendship groups, after school activities, sporting fields, at home, on public transport to and from school, parties, workplaces, parks, and social media (including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter).

> "School; online/cyber; workplace; home; sports; public and private areas; anywhere."

> "It happens a lot on social media these days, like for example Snapchat, because it disappears and there's no proof of it happening."

Mobile phones were frequently mentioned as a tool used for bullying. Young people spoke about group chats and using screen shots of messages to bully others.

Children and young people talked about the specific bullying that occurs in single sex schools. Those attending an all girls' school discussed the rivalry within friendship groups:

> "Friendship groups….there's like a hierarchy of who can say things and who doesn't really speak much."

Other locations mentioned by groups where bullying occurs included in intimate relationships, around academic competition and generally in places where there is no supervision.

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What are the best ways to stop bullying?

Children and young people provided a wide range of suggestions for reducing bullying. These could be grouped into things that victims and bystanders can do; things that schools can do; things that parents can do and general prevention and intervention strategies.

What victims and bystanders can do

Most importantly, children and young spoke about the importance of telling someone if they were experiencing bullying. Those suggested as people to tell included a teacher, parent, school principal or any trusted adult.

Many children and young people talked about the importance of ignoring the bully and trying to walk away:

> *"Don't retaliate as your action encourages them."*

Young people talked about other ways to ignore the bully, such as blocking them or unfriending them on social media.

Others felt that ignoring the bully does not work and they just keep coming back:

> *"Adults don't really understand, they think you can just ignore it, but it's every day and if you do just ignore it and walk away they'll come back to you and attack you still."*

A common theme throughout the focus groups was that adults simply do not understand how big of an issue bullying is for young people today and how serious the ramifications can be:

> *"We strongly believe that adults don't understand what we mean by bullying…they don't think it's as big as it actually is."*

There were also discussions around young people's inability to escape bullying in today's world, given constant access to mobile phones and social media. Young people talked about previous generations being able to "have a break" from bullying when they got home from school but social media has now made this impossible.

Children and young people also consistently raised the importance of bystander intervention. In almost all focus groups, there were discussions around young people needing to step in when they are aware that someone is being bullied to do something to help them:

> *"Don't be a bystander - when you see someone being bullied step up and try to stop them."*

Finally, children and young people identified the importance of trying to understand the bully's perspective. Many reported that the bully often has serious problems of their own and that these issues need to be addressed.

> *"The bully has a reason they're doing it so you need to consider them as well and find out why they're doing it."*

Things schools can do

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Children and young people brought up a wide range of ways that schools can assist with reducing episodes of bullying. These included treating students equally; implementing harsher consequences for bullies; introducing more anti-bullying programs and getting students involved in the solutions.

First, young people talked about teachers showing favouritism to certain students in situations of bullying. One common example of this reported was not listening to both sides of the story and often just believing the first person that reports it. In addition, some groups discussed that when a bully was having problems at home, teachers tend to be more lenient towards them and less likely to intervene.

Second, many groups of young people discussed that very often teachers simply do not intervene in bullying incidents. They reported that they would like teachers to step in and take a stance and also thought that there should be harsher consequences for those who bully others. These included school suspensions, removing them from all social media, issuing fines and even time in detention.

"Make the consequences big enough so that they know what will happen if they bully someone."

A very common theme emerging from the focus groups was the idea that there should be more programs in schools to address bullying. Children and young people identified that these programs should educate students about ways to prevent bullying; including bystanders defending the victim, bullies being shown how their actions hurt other people and also understanding the bully's perspective.

"Education to recognise and prevent bullying and to teach victims and bystanders what to do if a situation occurs."

Some young people also suggested that anti-bullying programs should address homophobia, racism and sexism. Young people also reported that these programs should be introduced in schools from a young age.

Finally, young people in one school talked about the importance of involving students in school based bullying interventions. These students had come up with a way of older students trying to reduce bullying among the younger students and the school had allowed them to implement it.

"We have Fight Patrol…we (students) get our pink vests on and we walk around the school and see if there's any bullying because we feel like the older kids can connect with the younger kids and we stay confidential with it."

Things parents can do

Children and young people reported that parents could assist their children in several ways. In addition to reporting bullying episodes to the school or police, they also discussed that parent could be more involved in their children's lives, such as putting time aside to talk to them more and ask them how their day was, monitoring their social media use and sometimes even walking home from school with them.

"Try and understand more, get involved in their lives, keep up with their social media."

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"Parents could ask the children how their day was or they could walk them to school and home to make sure they're okay."

Prevention and intervention strategies

Children and young people brought up some general prevention and intervention strategies to reduce bullying.

First, many groups of young people recommended a stop bullying campaign. They suggested the campaign could include celebrities talking about their experiences, schools putting up posters, and social media posts.

In addition to support from parents and schools and existing helplines, some groups suggested that there should be a specific helpline available 24 hours, seven days a week, specifically for children and young people that are experiencing bullying so that they could get specialist advice and support.
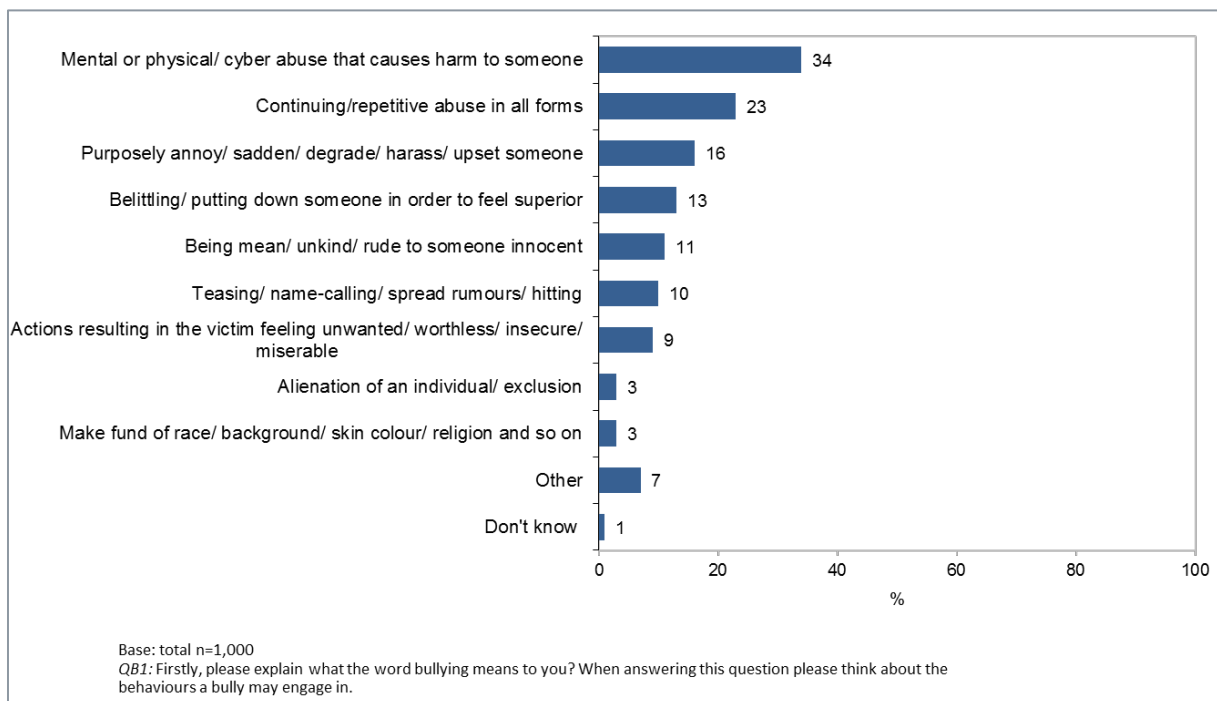
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Stage 2 findings: Online poll

What the term 'bullying' means to children and young people

Children and young people's responses to this question were consistent with young people's discussions in Stage 1 around what they considered bullying to be. Children and young people who took part in the online poll were most likely to say it means mental, physical or cyber abuse that causes harm to someone (34%), continuing, repetitive abuse in all forms (23%) and purposely annoy/sadden/degrade/harass or upset someone (16%).

Females (40%) were more likely than males (27%) to say bullying means mental, physical or cyber abuse that causes harm to someone.

Young people 12-18 years (33%) were more likely than those 19-24 years (13%) to say bullying means continuing, repetitive abuse in all forms.

Category	%
Mental or physical/ cyber abuse that causes harm to someone	34
Continuing/repetitive abuse in all forms	23
Purposely annoy/ sadden/ degrade/ harass/ upset someone	16
Belittling/ putting down someone in order to feel superior	13
Being mean/ unkind/ rude to someone innocent	11
Teasing/ name-calling/ spread rumours/ hitting	10
Actions resulting in the victim feeling unwanted/ worthless/ insecure/ miserable	9
Alienation of an individual/ exclusion	3
Make fund of race/ background/ skin colour/ religion and so on	3
Other	7
Don't know	1

Base: total n=1,000
QB1: Firstly, please explain what the word bullying means to you? When answering this question please think about the behaviours a bully may engage in.

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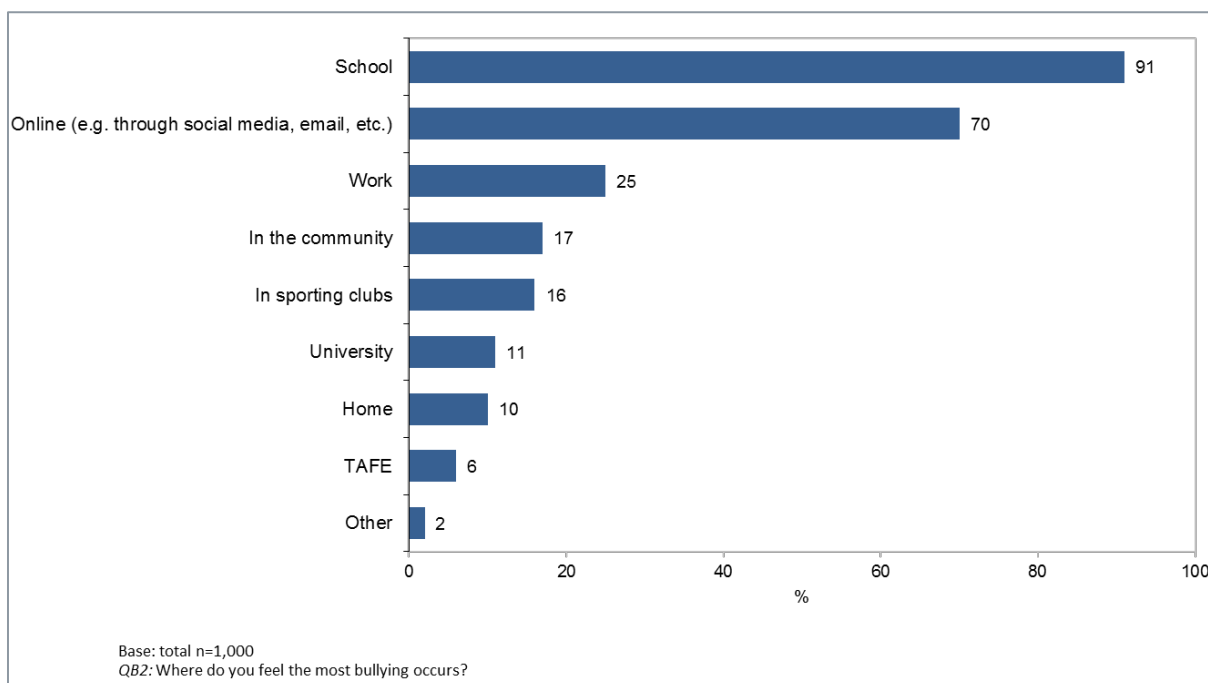## Where children and young people feel the most bullying occurs

Similarly to the children and young people who participated in the Stage 1 focus groups, the online poll respondents raised the same locations as places where bullying happens. Consistent with Stage 1, school was the most frequently mentioned location.

Children and young people reported that most bullying occurs at school (91%), online (70%) and in the workplace (25%).

Females (76%) were more likely than males (63%) to think that most bullying occurs online.

Those 19-24 years (33%) were more likely that those 12-18 years (18%) to think that most bullying occurs at work.

Those with a disability were more likely than those who do not have a disability to think that most bullying occurs at university (21% compared to 10%) and at home (18% compared to 9%).
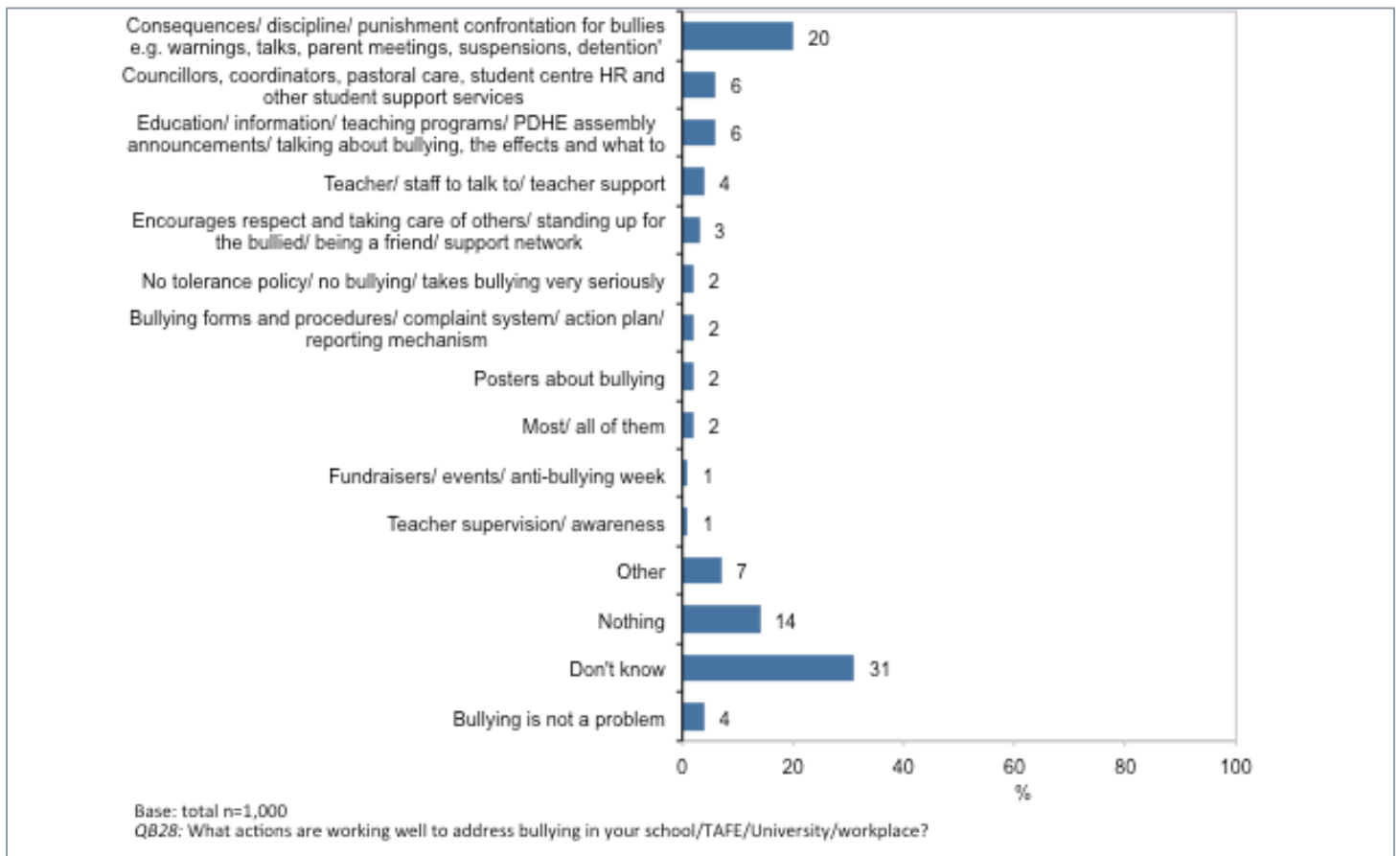
Location	%
School	91
Online (e.g. through social media, email, etc.)	70
Work	25
In the community	17
In sporting clubs	16
University	11
Home	10
TAFE	6
Other	2

Base: total n=1,000
QB2: Where do you feel the most bullying occurs?

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What children and young people say are the best ways to stop bullying

Actions being taken by institutions that children and young people say are working well

Children and young people that participated in the online poll reported that the main actions that their education institution/workplace currently take to address bullying that are working well are consequences/discipline/punishment/ confrontation for bullies e.g. warnings, talks, parent meetings, suspensions, detentions (20%), councillors, coordinators, pastoral care, student centre HR and other student support services (6%) and education/information/teaching programs/ PDHE assembly announcements talking about bullying, the effects and what to do/who to talk to if bullied (6%).

Males (24%) were more likely than females (16%) to say the actions their education institution/workplace take to address bullying that are working well includes consequences/discipline/punishment/ confrontation for bullies e.g. warnings, talks, parent meetings, suspensions, detentions.

Those 12-18 years (27%) were more likely than those 19-24 (12%) years to say the actions their education institution/ workplace currently take to address bullying are consequences/discipline/punishment/ confrontation for bullies e.g. warnings, talks, parent meetings, suspensions, detentions.

Base: total n=1,000
QB28: What actions are working well to address bullying in your school/TAFE/University/workplace?

Other actions children and young people think could be done to address bullying

Other actions children and young people said their education institution/workplace could be doing to address bullying were raising awareness/informing people about bullying, the effects and what to do/who to talk to if bullied (16%) and consequences/discipline/punishment/ confrontation for bullies e.g. warnings, talks, parent meetings, suspensions, detentions (15%).

Females (21%) were more likely than males (10%) to say the other actions their education institution/workplace could be taking to address bullying were raising awareness/informing people about bullying, the effects and what to do/who to talk to if bullied.

Base: total n=1,000
Q829: What else do you think your school/TAFE/University/workplace could be doing to address bullying that would make a difference?

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