Bullying and Cyberbullying

Who did we speak with?
In July and August 2013 the Commission consulted with over 900 children and young people about the issues that concerned them.

The consultation involved in-class discussions and an online questionnaire conducted in 34 primary and high schools across NSW drawn from the government, independent and Catholic sectors; and two community roundtables in Cabramatta and Wollongong.

The issue of most concern for the majority of children and young people was bullying, including online bullying. Over 80% of young people in classroom consultations nominated bullying as an important issue to fix and it was also the top ranked issue at both of the community roundtables.

Despite the serious efforts on the part of government and the community to counter bullying, children and young people are telling us there is still a way to go.

What is bullying and cyberbullying?
Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological behaviour that is harmful and involves the misuse of power by an individual or group towards others.

Cyberbullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies. It is generally seen as a new form of an old problem, rather than as a consequence of internet use itself.

The available research suggests that while the prevalence of cyberbullying is lower than face-to-face bullying, the potential harms may be greater with the use of pictures and videos, a wider audience, anonymous perpetrators and an inability to escape from the bullying behaviour.

Internet use is almost universal for Australian adolescents and use increases with age. Cyberbullying tends to be more common in the later years of high school, while in person bullying is more frequent for younger students.

The long-term costs of bullying to the victim and bully are well known. Bullying can make people feel alone, unsafe, afraid, stressed, ashamed and rejected. It can lead to school avoidance, poorer educational outcomes and reduced psychological wellbeing. Young people who are bullied often suffer immediate harm and distress as well as negative long-term mental health. Bullies are more likely to feel disconnected from school and dislike school, get into fights and leave school early.

The research suggests that vulnerable students are disproportionately at risk of bullying, including children with special education needs or disabilities, homeless young people, same sex attracted young people and members of visible minority groups including racial, ethnic or religious groups.

Bullying also affects bystanders and schools as a whole. Bystanders may be reluctant to attend school, feel fearful, have increased mental health problems and increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. The social climate of a school is negatively affected by ongoing bullying which can be detrimental to student learning, staff retention and parent confidence. Students may feel insecure, dislike school and perceive that teachers and staff have little control and don’t care about them.
What did the young people say?

Bullying and harm
Children and young people highlighted the prevalence of bullying, the harmful effects and the difficulties in addressing this issue:

"Bullying is a problem for everyone because it puts people down. It makes people sad. It even sometimes makes people commit suicide."

"Kids go to school to learn and not get bullied."

"Some young people drop out of school because of bullying so they are not getting educated as well."

"Bullying and peer pressure are age old issues that no one seems to have the answer for. It’s hard to control things in the schoolyard but something needs to change. We can’t have generations of children who have been bullied all their lives."

"Many students across the country face bullying in school. As a result, many of them would feel unsafe and intimidated."

"For the person being bullied it breaks my heart. Makes me feel upset. Makes me feel like I have no friends."

This fits with other research showing 27% of young people report they are bullied every two weeks or more often; bullying can seriously damage physical, social and emotional health; bullying occurs within and across generations; and young people who are bullied tend to have a dislike of and want to avoid school.

Who is bullying and why?
The young people consulted see bullying as complex and suggest that the motivations and needs of the bully are important to think about:

"Some people who don’t know they are a bully are stigmatised – they don’t see that they can be a bully."

"Bullies are usually insecure about themselves."

"Often the bully is also being bullied and has a severe amount of self-hate and needs help."

"A bully is a power hungry beast."

"Kids get bullied because other kids are jealous."

"A bully might be dealing with problems with a person or at home and take it out on the keyboard."

"People try to impress their friends for popularity – if you are a bully you are cool – peer pressure."

Cyberbullying
Young people talked about technology providing a new platform for anonymous bullying on-line. There were comments that parents and teachers may not understand the online world enough to be able to help:

"It is only getting worse with technology."

"Social media is a new thing – no one really knows how to deal with it."

"For us it’s much harder because social media is so new, our parents and teachers never grew up with social media, so they don’t know what to do – they haven’t experienced it."

"It’s complicated when it happens online, school don’t know how to deal with bullying that doesn’t happen at school."

What can we learn from children and young people?

An important part of assessing the impact of policies and initiatives designed to tackle bullying and cyberbullying is to check back with children and young people about the realities of their own lives.

This consultation highlights that young people from a range of areas and backgrounds believe that bullying is a significant concern for young people.

This accords with international research that says bullying is experienced by a considerable proportion of young people world-wide.

Solutions to bullying
Solutions proposed by the children and young people ranged from counselling and supporting victims in confronting bullies to promoting awareness of the problem, stronger advertising of anti-bullying programs and harsher penalties:

"Victim and bully both need counselling."

"Label bullies like alcoholism - 12 step program for bullying behaviours."
“[We should] educate people in how to react to bullies. Verbal and social bullying should be more something you react to. Others intervene when it gets physical.”

“Need to be smart enough to be safe.”

“I make it better by not going near the person who is bullying. Getting strong in my heart and head.”

“... Flipping the emphasis to focus on the bullied.”

“Bully awareness day.”

“Create awareness “it’s not ok” – advertise the idea.”

“I would make it better by strongly advertising anti-bullying programs.”

“Greater education to reduce stigmatisation; bigger, better anti-bullying programs.”

“This problem could be solved by laying down much more serious consequences for offenders.”

Proposed solutions also targeted schools and teachers, with suggestions for better education in schools and more effort to provide a friendly school environment:

“Schools are assisting - however it’s done in a very boring way.”

“Attitudes of teachers need to change.”

“There needs to be support - I was bullied online and the school wasn’t supportive they didn’t see what I was seeing – my mum supported me.”

“Providing a friendly environment is much more important as it would build trust bridges between the adults (teachers and staff) and students. In this way students may feel safe, supported and welcomed in any situations they are facing.”

In relation to cyberbullying, young people’s suggestions included more social media and website monitoring:

“Social media companies should monitor more. Some of the content is really bad.”

“Teenagers are most victimised and insecure online. Authorities could monitor more pages and sites so not victimised.”

Current efforts

The NSW Government and the Australian Government have implemented a number of policies and initiatives to prevent and respond to bullying in schools.

The policies and programs that have been developed are all soundly based on the best available evidence.

New South Wales (NSW)

The 2011 Bullying: Preventing and Responding to Student Bullying in Schools Policy required all NSW public schools to review their anti-bullying plans. All public schools must implement an anti-bullying plan with specific strategies for protection, prevention, early intervention and response strategies for student bullying. The plans are developed collaboratively with students, staff, parents and the community and schools are expected to report back on the success of their strategies.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) policies, Bullying: Preventing and Responding to Student Bullying in Schools and Student Discipline in Government Schools, apply to students who engage in cyberbullying where there is a clear and close connection between the school and the conduct of the student.

Schools decide on appropriate interventions for individual circumstances of bullying behaviour. Interventions may include: bystander training; buddy systems; restorative practices; the method of shared concern; mediation; counselling; social skills training or a disciplinary approach.

Additional materials have been developed by DEC to support school based anti-bullying initiatives. These include: facts sheets, professional learning packages for schools and school executive staff, training programs, the digital education revolution website with online resources, information on the DEC School A-Z webpage which includes practical help for parents, and resources for student leaders.

Under the NSW Government’s Supporting Students Plan, which commenced in 2011, 50 Student Support Officers have been employed to areas of greatest need. They support secondary students as part of a schools’ learning and support teams alongside the school counsellor. One of the officers’ key roles is addressing bullying and the impact of social networking on young people. Catholic and independent schools also have anti-bullying policies and plans in place.

Australian Government

The National Safe Schools Framework is a collaboration between the Australian and State and Territory Governments that aims to create learning environments which are free from bullying, harassment, aggression and violence.
The National Safe Schools Framework has nine elements which are based on a combination of good practice, research-based literature, and feedback from representatives from all educational systems, sectors and educators. The Child Health Promotion Research Centre has developed Friendly Schools Plus which provides schools with validated strategies and resources to meet the nine elements of the National Safe Schools Framework.

The Framework aligns with the National Smarter Schools Partnerships; the Australian Curriculum; the National Strategy for Young Australians; and NSW policies and legislative frameworks.

The Australian Government also provides the Safe Schools Hub. The Hub is a one-stop shop that provides school communities, teachers, school leaders, students, parents and specialist professionals with a range of safe school strategies.

The National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence commenced in 2011 and many NSW public schools participate to raise awareness about bullying and violence.

In 2014 the Australian Government committed funding for: online safety programs for schools; Australian-based research and information campaigns on online safety; and to establish the Office of the Children's e-Safety Commissioner. The Commissioner will provide national leadership on online safety for industry, families, and groups responsible for the wellbeing of children.

Many community and non-government organisations are also actively working to prevent bullying.

Future directions

Bullying is not confined to young people. It occurs in many contexts in the adult community as well and is recognised as a complex problem for the whole society.

No one intervention is suitable in all circumstances of bullying. Interventions need to be matched to the particular incident of bullying and more than one intervention may be necessary.

It is unrealistic to expect that even the best anti-bullying policies and programs will address the issue on their own. No single method of addressing bullying among young people has been reported as 100% effective.

Anti-bullying programs need to be accompanied by wider efforts to build the resilience of all children and young people (bully and bullied alike) and create safe environments for young people.

Positive family relationships can reduce the negative consequences of being bullied or engaging in bullying behaviour and governments have an important role in supporting families with children. This is particularly so for families who are under stress due to illness, disability, poverty or unstable housing.

Parents play a critical role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying through communicating with teenagers and balancing monitoring internet use with allowing young people to negotiate their own age-appropriate boundaries. The relationship between parents and school is also important and parents should familiarise themselves with school policies and report cyberbullying incidents to the school.

For young people without a stable or supportive family, the role of school and community-based support is particularly crucial.

Evidence suggests that support from friends and a broader social network may also help buffer young people against the negative impacts associated with bullying.

Sometimes young people fear that speaking out may worsen the problem and increase retribution from the bully, or in the case of cyberbullying, that telling an adult will result in limitations on their access to technology. Children and young people need to be encouraged to speak out when they are bullied and should not be made to feel they are to blame. Instead, they should be supported to ensure their safety once they have spoken out.

While recognising that anti-bullying programs cannot be the sole solution, it is important that these programs are informed by the best available evidence and implemented consistently and faithfully.

Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of anti-bullying programs can be enhanced by consulting children and young people about the real world effectiveness and appropriateness of anti-bullying strategies.
Links and resources

Bullying No Way:

Headspace:
http://www.headspace.org.au/is-it-just-me/find-information/bullying

ReachOut:
http://au.reachout.com/Bullying

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation:

ThinkUKnow:
http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/

Cybersmart:

Easyguide to socialising online:
www.communications.gov.au/easyguide

Kids helpline:
www.kidshelpline.com.au

Lifeline: www.lifeline.org.au

Safe Schools Framework:
http://safeschoolshub.edu.au/

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iv Headspace, Bullying: Bullying is not just a part of growing up, accessed at http://www.headspace.org.au/is-it-just-me/find-information/bullying
xii More information can be found at the Friendly Schools Website: http://friendlyschools.com.au/fsp/
xiii Rigby K (2010), Bullying in Schools: Six Methods of Intervention, ACER, Camberwell.