

BALANCING THE POWER

BEYOND THE BULLYING HYPE



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WORKSHOP NOTES

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BALANCING THE POWER - BEYOND THE BULLYING HYPE

By Steve Heron

Many current attempts at trying to stop bullying in schools are either like cutting a birthday cake with a hammer or cutting a steak with a feather.

Bullying is not so much the problem; but the way generally we look at it could be.



Firstly, our definition of bullying may be letting us down. Secondly, our approaches can often reflect punitive and not restorative processes. Thirdly, our limited solutions are often locked into interventions and not enough on prevention.

OUR DEFINITION OF BULLYING COULD BE LETTING US DOWN

To call someone a ‘bully’ is over-simplistic – It suggests that *a bully is a bad person that picks on you*. It is not a helpful label. It is not a useful definition.

The words ‘bully’ and ‘bullying’ are emotive, negative and often unhelpful. They were rarely part of a young child’s vocabulary until recently. Media, schools and parents have accentuated an awareness to bullying by throwing every negative thing that happens in a child’s relationship into the bullying basket. Nowadays the words flow from the lips of children too often when they are having normal conflict with their peers. When these words are used they only serve to propound the problem.

Our communities seem overwhelmed with the notion of bullying to the point where it obscures the overall situation. We focus on the wrong thing – the problem.

Children can bully other children, but most of what is labelled as bullying is more about the behaviour and the balance in the relationship. This behaviour is where one child is not respecting another’s rights to feel safe and be respected.

“Everyone has the right to feel safe and be respected.”

Definition of Bullying:

“A repeated, persistent, or systematic action by one or more people that violates another’s rights to feel safe and be respected.”

A child who is not treating another child respectfully is often trying to get some form of control in their own lives. They are trying to balance their own sense of power. It is indicator that something is not right with that child’s wellbeing.

“Hurt people - hurt people”

Children who generally don't respect others are not 'bad'. While their behaviour may not be acceptable our aim should be to help them learn effectively how to respect others as well as themselves.

Rather than label a child as a 'bully' it would make more sense to promote respect and positive relationship skills.

BALANCING THE POWER

Bullying is about an imbalance of power. Most bullying behaviour arises from unresolved conflict and is often between children who used to be friends.

Izzy Kalman from www.bulliestobuddies.com defines bullying as; 'Wrong relationships.'

If bullying is about relationships that have gone wrong, then we would do well to teach children important relationship skills and conflict resolution skills; this in turn would serve to reduce bullying.

OUR APPROACHES CAN OFTEN REFLECT PUNITIVE AND NOT RESTORATIVE PROCESSES

Many anti-bullying campaigns highlight the 'problem', therefore engage people in a sense of rage that something has to be done. While it is desirable to achieve a zero tolerance to bullying, there has been a tendency toward punitive measures to solve the problem.

Punitive forms of handling bullying issues only serve to perpetuate the notion of power imbalance. I heard a child say, 'If we bully the bullies, it will only make more bullies.'

If bullying is about an imbalance of power it would serve us well to employ initiatives that empower everyone. Rather than talking about anti-bullying campaigns let's have some conversation about bully-proofing by proactively building social confidence in children, communities of respect and engaging in restorative practices.



PUNISHMENT – LIKE CUTTING A BIRTHDAY CAKE WITH A HAMMER

Punishment is a very poor form of teaching right from wrong and generally is not an effective way to stop someone bullying another.

It's unfortunate that many people have a shallow punitive perspective on bullying that is over simplified as; 'Bad people vs good people.' 'Bully vs victim.'

'The bullies need to be punished.' 'How will they ever learn that this behaviour is unacceptable without some form of punishment?' They may say.

The problem is that punishment is an extremely poor method of teaching right from wrong - full stop! Punishment looks like it works, but it doesn't.

Punishment relies on external motivation. Once that external motivation is removed then the behaviour creeps back.

There is scientific evidence indicating this as the case. Michael Karson Ph. D. J D in “Feeling our way.” Refers to enlightening research on rats that establishes one of the few laws of nature in psychology. When referring to the research he says, ‘punishment does not change the tendency to engage in the behaviour that was punished.’

Children’s brains are still developing. This includes their moral development. Punishment will let us down if we are trying to use it to get children to fully develop their morality. Moral development is about getting children to move from; “I will do this because I want people to like me.’ And, ‘I won’t do this because it is against the law.’ To, ‘I will do this because it is actually the right thing to do.’

If a child makes a moral choice based on fear of punishment then they will not mature in their moral development.

Restorative process and communities of respect are a more long term and effective mediums to develop morality and enhance right relationships.

Bullying is a form of “Power Over”. Punishment is a form of “Power Over”. Punishment will then contribute to the notion that someone has the right to have power over another.

Punishment doesn’t guarantee accountability. Restorative Justice is a powerful process that has a high degree of accountability and breeds respect.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.”

Martin Luther King Jnr

OUR LIMITED SOLUTIONS ARE OFTEN LOCKED INTO INTERVENTIONS AND NOT ENOUGH ON PREVENTION

We don't need more 'policies' about bullying, but practical solutions that create respectful community relationships, where emotional and relational health and well-being is utmost priority.

It serves little purpose in bowing to the negativity of trying to find what is wrong and then fixing it. This is a pathological way of tackling an issue. It can't be classed as 'prevention'. It is actually 'intervention' and often, it is not even an effective cure.

I am encouraged when I see schools find what is good and right about their community and aim to make it better, focusing on the future. It is not always an easy concept to get support for, because we humans are wired to find out what is wrong with something, plan a program to fix it, run the program and then evaluate how well the program went.

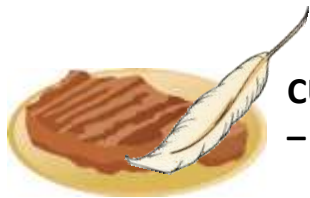
It seems to me that the best way to fix something is to not let it get broken in the first place. Imagine if an airline company had a maintenance policy of only fixing something when it was broken!

An effective approach to bullying prevention – ‘The most excellent way’

I believe that the most effective approach to the bullying issue in schools is to prevent it from happening in the first place. To eliminate bullying we need to create communities of respect, connectedness, positivity and restorative practice.

- CREATE COMMUNITIES OF RESPECT – build a community ethos – a whole school approach
- CONNECTEDNESS – where everyone is treasured and encouraged to contribute
- POSITIVITY – Look for the good and aim to make it better
- RESTORATIVE PRACTICE – Aim toward restoring relationships and reconciliation when something goes wrong
- RELATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS LEARNING – Intentional and a priority – that empower children with day to day friendship and conflict resolution skills

The equation is simple: MORE RESPECT = LESS BULLYING



CURRENT STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN – LIKE CUTTING STEAK WITH A FEATHER

Many schools have policies on bullying. In most states it is a requirement by their various education departments. Most of these policies include some kind of process that children are meant to use when they are being bullied at school. The three strategies mentioned are often what children are presented with in the majority of schools.

If you are being bullied you can:

- Walk away
- Tell them to stop
- Tell a teacher



The advice children are getting from parents and teachers to stop other kids bullying them is just not cutting it. By the time a child reaches the age of seven they will tell you that ‘**stop it, I don’t like it**’ doesn’t cut it; ‘**walk away and ignore**’ doesn’t work and ‘**telling an adult**’ is often a waste of time.

Let me explain why most of the time these in their current form are ineffective, that children themselves generally don't like them and say that they don't work!

When a child comes to talk to me about being picked on, teased or bullied by someone I ask them, ‘What have you tried so far?’ To which most of them say one or more of the following:

- ‘I walked away but they followed me.’
- ‘They are in my class and I can't get away from them.’

'I told them to stop but they just keep on doing it'.
'I have tried telling a teacher but they don't do anything'.

These are the most common responses I get from children. They do not at all feel empowered by the strategies that schools are presenting to them.
Let me unpack each, one at a time.

WALK AWAY (Avoiding the conflict?)

Whilst this can be a useful strategy, children are not being taught how and when to use it properly.

When I first started working in schools and even now, many years later, the most common response that teachers and parents say to children when they complain about how another child has treated them is, 'We'll, don't play with them.' Or 'Stay away from them.'

Most bullying comes from unresolved conflict. Staying away or walking away from someone is not going to solve conflict; it usually serves to make it worse.

Many children tell me that they want to sort out a disagreement, but the other person just keeps walking away. They are extremely frustrated by this and feel helpless when the other child just walks away.

TELL THEM TO STOP (Confronting the conflict)

When I ask children about this one they say, 'I have tried it but it doesn't work.'

I usually ask them, 'So you spoke to them, what did you say?'

They usually say something like this, 'I said to them, can you please stop'.

'That's nice, did it work?'

'No!'

'Then why do you keep on using it? It seems to me that if someone is not treating you with respect it would make more sense to speak firmly instead of nicely'.

They usually agree with me. Sometimes they say, 'I said to them, STOP IT, I DON'T LIKE IT.'

'I've heard that before. Does that work?'

'No'.

'Where did you learn to say that?'

'In pre-primary! It's stupid but it's what teachers expect us to say. Everyone knows that it is dumb and it doesn't work.'

This strategy originated from protective behaviours and that is where it belongs. Children need a strong language when they are confronted with a situation where they need to

protect themselves. If an adult is trying to touch them inappropriately then they need to be able to say in a strong voice, 'STOP IT I DON'T LIKE IT'. It is an effective skill to protect children, but shouldn't be used in common conflict, teasing and disagreements that children have with each other.

It is not respectful to the other child. Imagine if your spouse didn't like something you did and they said to you in a firm voice, with their hand thrust at you, 'Stop it, I don't like it'.

Whenever I give my talk on bully-proofing to early childhood teachers about this it gets an interesting reaction. As I ask them about this I have heard them say things like. 'I've never really liked getting children to say this' or 'Finally, someone is brave enough to tell us that this strategy is not really working.'

Let's face it, true bullying does not really happen in pre-primary. Children at this age are still developing their social and emotional brains and a true definition of bullying just doesn't fit in early childhood. Don't get me wrong, children do have conflict at this age. This is the age we should be concentrating on powerful and practical social and emotional skills training. We owe these children a lot more than; 'Stop it I don't like it?'

TELL A TEACHER (Seen by kids as dobbing)

When I ask children if they have told a teacher, by far the most common responses I get from children is either, 'They don't do anything.' or 'I don't want to dob.'

When children say that the teachers don't do anything they usually mean that the situation doesn't get better. I tell them that it doesn't mean that the teacher doesn't care. I know they do. I say to the child that often a teacher has so many children bringing these kinds of things to them that they feel a bit overwhelmed.

I ask them, 'What do teachers say to you when you speak to them about someone who is not treating you with respect?'

They respond with these kinds of answers; 'Sometimes they say to stay away from them. Sometimes they say to tell the other person to stop. Sometimes they tell the other person off. Sometimes they say, 'Don't dob'!'

I ask children what the difference between telling a teacher and dobbing is.

'They are the same!'

Some schools use, 'Get help' instead of 'Tell a teacher', but often these schools don't always teach children how to get help and when to get help. Often the teachers deal with the issue in a punitive way, which I have alluded to the shortcomings earlier. Sometimes teachers haven't been trained to handle conflict resolution and restorative practices between children so the system falls down and children are frustrated and underpowered.

BALANCING THE POWER

Bullying is about an imbalance of power, therefore bully-proofing is about balancing the power.

I have already mentioned the importance of empowering children with conflict resolution skills. I recommend the BUZ Hopscotch Method of Conflict Resolution. This can be used when two agree to resolve the conflict, but children need strategies to use when someone is not being cooperative or continuously being disrespectful.

The BUZ Gimme 5 Strategies for bully-proofing. (Balancing the power)



WALK

This can be an effective way to help ignore the bullying. If you aren't there, they can't pick on you. Walking away is a useful strategy when being picked on, but it is not a helpful strategy in a conflict between friends.

The walk tactics:

- *Give a quick eye contact.* This to let them know you heard what they said, but that you are ok and not going to let it bother you.
- *Keep your head up.* This to show you are strong.
- *Walk away the 'cool' way.* Use a straight walk with no unnecessary body language.
- *Don't say anything to the person.* Just choose to ignore them.
- *Say something to yourself to build yourself up.* Like, 'I'm ok. I'm not going to let that bother me.'

The idea behind walking away is to take your power with you. You may be upset about what they have said, but don't show it to them, as this only serves to give them power.

TALK

It is often very useful and important to stand up for yourself by speaking to the other person in a FIRM but friendly way.

The tactics:

- *Say how you feel* (use 'I messages'. 'I feel.....')
- *Say why you feel that way* ('Because.....')
- *Say what you want* ('I want you to stop, or I want you to be respectful.')

I always ask children who come to me for help if they have talked to the other person about it. They usually say, 'Yes.'

I ask, 'What did you say to them?'

They usually say something like, 'Can you please stop being mean?'

I say, 'That's nice, did it work?'

They say, 'Not really.'

I respond by saying, 'Sadly, being nice doesn't always work in his situation, that's why you need to be *firm*. Next time, tell them how you feel, why you feel that way and what you want.'

'Don't say please.' I tell them that the word please, for some reason, makes it sound weak. This is one occasion when saying please will not always be helpful. Be firm, but friendly.

There are two other tactics that can be added to TALK.

- *Ask the other person*, 'Have I done anything to make you treat me this way?' Or 'Are you angry with me for some reason?'
- *Be prepared to say 'sorry' if you have done something wrong*. This can be a pretty sure way to get them to stop treating you with disrespect. Maybe they have been treating you badly because they think you have done something to them. This is often a sure way to find out if it is a conflict.

BOUNCE (Bounce back a retort)

This is another opportunity to say something to the person who is picking on you. It only works when they are saying disrespectful things and it only works if you are good at it. It requires quick, clear and often abstract or clever thinking. Usually children under seven haven't acquired the skills to do this well yet. Bounce backs are about balancing the power or taking the power out of the bullying.

Bounce backs don't always work. They can sometimes be a bit risky, especially if you do them in front of the person's friends or if you tend to be giving more of a putdown than a bounce back.

The tactics:

- *Say something funny back* - humour has an uncanny way of taking power out of a situation.
- *Surprise the other person with a compliment* - it's less easy to pick on someone who is being nice to you.
- *Invite them to do something with or for you* - sometimes, what appears to be one child picking on another, by saying something mean, is actually a clumsy attempt to make friends. If you invite the person who is picking on you to be a friend then often they may stop picking on you.
- *Agree with them (without putting yourself down)*. They don't really have anywhere to go with this, at least for a while. If you are not bothered by what they say to you it no longer gives them power.
- *Deflect* - this is about saying things that deflect the power of their words. It includes saying things like: 'You're entitled to your opinion'. 'Sorry, what is that you said?' 'That's what I thought you said'. 'Do you feel better now?' The key to deflecting is to show the other person that their words of insult will just not stick.

GET HELP

This is a tricky tactic. As children get older, they tend to believe that getting help is not an option, because they believe it may only make things worse. I believe this has a lot to do with us as adults and how we have handled children asking for help when they were younger. When children are younger they are often told not to 'dob'. What tends to happen when children dob is one of two things. They are either told to go away and don't dob or the adult responds by going to the other person and telling them off. There are however, some clever adults who know some useful processes that help children to work through the issue with them.

Getting help is about getting support, so that you feel stronger, to balance the power. It is not about getting someone to solve the problem for you, it is about getting the resources to be strong enough to deal with it yourself. Sometimes an adult may need to intervene if the bullying has gotten out of hand. The most effective way of an adult intervening is to use the Restorative Justice process.

I tell children to get help when they need it, even though it is best if they are able to handle the situation themselves. There are times when getting help is necessary. Find someone you trust, someone who will listen and support you. Not someone who is going to tell the other person off or punish them. Tell them what happened, how you feel about what happened and what you have done so far. If you need their help actually ask them for it. Say, 'Can you please help me with something.'

BULLY SHIELDS

Bully shields are really about self-confidence or social confidence.

When I teach children the Gimme 5 strategies on a one-to-one basis, I get to the bully-shields. I tell them that this is probably the most important. Your bully-shields have a lot to do with how you feel about yourself and what is happening in your life. When there are sad things in your life or when something bad has happened at home, it is like your shields have a crack in them or they are down.

When I explain this to children I ask, 'Is there anything happening in your life at the moment that might be making a hole in your shields?'

I am absolutely blown away nearly every time. The child begins to cry or tries very hard to hold back the tears as they tell me about something that is happening at home or with family. The kinds of things vary from, family breakdown, Grandma being very sick, dad being away, mum and dad fighting, not getting along with stepdad, pets dying and basically anything that a child is grieving.

When I ask them, 'Have you talked to anyone else about this, or does anyone else know how you feel.' Nearly every time, the answer is 'No. Who else is there to tell?'

I am so taken by the courage and honesty of these children as they explain their predicament. I get them to talk about their feelings and help them find the strengths to help them through this time and help them re-power their shields.

Hence, *'All power to the shields.'* When children regain their confidence they are empowered to handle things so much better.

I sometimes ask children to name a child in their class that never gets picked on or bullied by anyone. Unsurprisingly, they usually mention a child that I am thinking of. I ask them why they think that the child doesn't get picked on. Some of the answers I get include:

'Because they are nice.'

'Because they are friendly to others.'

'Because they are good at things or confident.'

'Because they are often smiling and don't get angry much.'

'Because they treat others with respect.'

'Because they are positive.'

The list of attributes that children mention fit into the 5 elements to making a Build-Up Zone or Bully-shield.

Build up your confidence

Have a group of supportive friends

Handle your feelings

Change negatives to positives

Treat others as you want them to treat you

A child's self-confidence is their main defence against other children being disrespectful. Unfortunately there are many things that can suck the social confidence from children, especially grief. Helping them to rebuild their confidence is a key to them overcoming many forms of adversity.

'Self-confidence is like kryptonite to bullying'.

'If you are comfortable in your own skin – your skin will be strong'.

The BUZ Gimme 5 Bully-proofing tactics do work, no matter what age you are. They are very powerful. They may not all work all of the time. One tactic on its own may not be enough. The more you use the better. You will have to decide which ones to use and when you need them.

Sometimes things may seem to get worse for a while. For the tactics to work the person who is doing the bullying will lose power over you. They won't necessarily like this at first and may try harder for a while. Stick to your guns. Don't stop doing these tactics. Some children have come to me after trying one or two of them only once and have said that they don't work. That's like going to two piano lessons and saying, 'I can't play the piano!' That's right. It does take practice.

ALL POWER TO THE SHIELDS

A full description of the BUZ Hopscotch Method of Conflict Resolution and the BUZ Gimme 5 Strategies can be found in "Bully-Proofing – The Art of Social Confidence in Children" by Steve Heron.

THE BUZ HOPSCOTCH METHOD OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

One of the most effective inoculations against bullying is the skill of conflict resolution. Conflict happens. Conflict is a normal part of life. Different beliefs, different customs, different expectations, and different ideas mean that people will often come into conflict.

Bullying is a form of conflict, but usually infers that one party has the upper hand, therefore creating a power imbalance. When children are given the opportunity to learn the skills of conflict resolution, they will have important skills for the rest of their lives. The BUZ Hopscotch Method of Conflict Resolution © is a very effective process for helping children resolve conflict with their peers, family, and friends.



SOCIAL SKILLS

CELEBRATE

- Party Skills

AGREE AND FIX

- Collaboration
- Compromise

IDEAS

- Creative thinking
- Negotiation

PROBLEM

- Problem solving

TALK AND LISTEN

- Assertiveness
- Communication
- Using I messages
- Empathy

STOP AND THINK

- Self control
- Emotional Competence