

# Loreto High School Beaufort

## Parents Association AGM

### Understanding Bullying - How parents can help

Talk by: Dr. Maria Garvey

(Designer of Award winning  
*Helping Hands Anti-Bullying programme*)

- Early Identification of Hidden Bullying
- Inclusion and psychological safety of students

(A programme based on sociometry and in-depth professional  
development of teachers)



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# Why bullying remains invisible

Despite the consistent best efforts of schools, most students (85% of teenagers) do not report bullying.

The Growing up in Ireland Survey found that only 23% of the parents of 10-year olds were aware that they were being bullied.

It is typically hidden in the peer group where victims are unable to defend themselves

To effectively address the problem, we need to understand why this is so

# Understanding the bullied student

- Targets can get locked into the role of victim as early as 8/9 years
- Adolescents frequently believe themselves incapable of behaving in a manner contrary to the role
- Victims (targets) can be self-aware and able to reflect on their situation
- Sensitive and capable of engaging with friends
- Feel betrayed by, and unable to trust friends
- Unlikely to have the cognitive and emotional resources to learn



# Fears

- **Denial:** Students do not want to acknowledge that they are victims  
*'If I'm not a victim I am a normal student, this is not happening to me'*  
*'Maybe it might stop or go away'*

Denial can be the only protection available to some victims. It is important not to try and remove it when other protections are not in place

- **Self attribution:** *'maybe its my fault, perhaps I caused it'*
- **Shame:** *'I'm ashamed of being a victim, it means I'm a wimp, less of a person'*
- **Confusion:** The perpetrator can become *'so nice'* to the victim if they suspect a change in the relationship dynamic, or they can use a combination of inclusion one day and exclusion the next

# Fear of others

## - Perpetrator and peer group

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- The perpetrator has all the power, some targets refer to their 'incredible' power (often not visible to parents or teachers)
- Victims feel in an entirely unequal contest
- They fear provoking an angry bully who would 'lash out' in a worse manner if bullying is reported
- Terrified to mention the perpetrator's name (so how can they report?)
- The peer group will punish 'ratting', 'snitching' by further rejection and exclusion - unbearable for already vulnerable and rejected students - hanging on at the edge of the group
- Exclusion from the peer group, frequently perceived to be an unbearable fate

# Psychological structure of the classroom

- We can ensure physical safety at school
- Psychological safety more challenging to identify
- Psychological structure of relationship dynamics in the peer group is frequently invisible to teachers



# The peer group bystanders

Bullying is a group process.

Bystanders may feel frightened when they witness the treatment of the target

A powerful aggressor with high levels of social skills can manipulate the peer group and use it as an instrument of aggression.

# The peer group bystanders

It is not possible for bystanders to stand up or intervene if they do not have the personal power or the social status in the peer group to do so

They especially cannot stand up to a powerful perpetrator who is frequently able and prepared to punish them

# The peer group bystanders

Powerless bystanders recognise the danger they face. They are unlikely to reveal hidden bullying as they know that they too will be targeted if they break the unspoken code

This is especially so where the bullying is subtle, easily denied by the perpetrator and difficult for the victim to put into words

# An example from the adult world exemplifies

(The Neary Case – Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital,  
Drogheda)

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This excerpt from the report of Judge Harding Clarke (2006, p. 32) crystallizes the silence that surrounds bullying:

*'No one saw anything out of the ordinary... not the patients, their partners nor their families...not the junior doctors... [nor] registrars...not the anaesthetists...not the surgical nurses...not the midwives...not the pathologists and technicians...not the matrons...not the sisters of the Medical Missionaries of Mary...not one of the various GP's...not any of the parties who read the maternity hospital's biennial report in the years when it was published. No one made a formal complaint, and no one questioned openly'.*

# The peer group

- There is usually one primary target in a peer group / class chosen for victimisation
- It is easier to isolate, exclude, reject or scapegoat a single person
- Too many rejectees could support each other

# Understanding the person who bullies

Controversial figures in the peer group – liked by some and feared and rejected by others

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**Always have a support group / power base**

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Popular and included in the peer group because they have the power to assert themselves

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Popular but not necessarily liked and this difference is frequently not visible to parents or teachers

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Powerful and socially dominant. They use their power to control others – teachers as well as peers

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Being fearless, socially astute, socially dominant, they can frustrate and pervert investigations – hence the time consuming and ineffective nature of many anti-bullying investigations

# Understanding the person who bullies

Hostile attributional bias - blame others for their problems

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Defensive, angry and in denial regarding their behaviour so they impede, frustrate and confuse investigations

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Display outwardly confident behaviour

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Outspoken and very willing to accuse others of bullying but strongly deny their own bullying behaviours

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Difficult to identify them as they may appear far removed from the troublesome behaviours

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# The role of Empathy in bullying

*Two forms of Empathy – Cognitive and Affective*

- Cognitive Empathy (Cold Empathy / Mind empathy) involves understanding the emotions of others and being able to see their perspective. It does not, however, include emotional involvement
- Cognitive Empathy only exists in humans
- Affective Empathy (Warm Empathy / emotional empathy) involves 'fellow feeling', we feel for another who is suffering
- It is instinctual, exists from birth and is shared by all mammals including humans and primates

# Transition from primary to secondary school

- Bullying can move seamlessly with a student from primary to secondary school
- Victimised students often hope for a new beginning in secondary school. They frequently find these hopes dashed almost immediately, as the bullying they hoped to escape follows them
- Once a message is spread in the peer group that John / Mary was bullied in Primary School, **they automatically become targets of bullying students** in the new school

# First year induction programs

- Most schools put significant effort into inducting new first year students, welcoming them and helping them to settle in to their new school
- Unable to penetrate the hidden, silent world of the peer group where some students are already targeted
- Young students
  - finding their own feet
  - coping with the challenges of their new environment
  - keeping themselves safe are often ready to avoid / reject targeted students

# Making it safe to 'tell'

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- Confidentiality
- Safety
- Empathic listening
- Trust building
- Building a support network including parents, teachers, friends
- Empowerment
- Experience of success ✓
- Recognition

# Parents

- Young people can be profoundly reluctant to report bullying to their parents
- Parents need to understand that this is not a reflection on their relationship – often those that are closest to their parents are least likely to report
- Parents suffer extreme distress when they discover that their children are being bullied
- Young people wish to protect their parents from this distress
- Some fear, with justification, that it will make their situation worse
- Distress experienced by parents can be so severe as to impede their ability to effectively support the young person and intervene productively to achieve a positive outcome

# Cian again

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*'telling your parents ... maybe they'll tell the teachers or if you tell the teachers they'll tell your parents and like it doesn't really end too well if you start getting all those involved.'*

*'once ye get parents involved the bully will probably find out who told the parents or the bully will probably get in way more trouble and lash out even more, for any future victims.'*

# The Role of parents

## - Supporting the school

- Resolving bullying is a process, not an event. An important part of the process is the empowerment of the victim to progress towards a resolution at a pace that they can tolerate
- As targets become empowered, by being given confidential support, they are encouraged by the school support team to inform their parents. This is a vital step in the resolution process
- Should they be unwilling to do so, for fear of upsetting parents, they are allowed a confidential timeframe where they are supported on their journey towards empowerment
- Parents need to be willing to support a school that takes this approach so as to increase the current extremely low levels of reporting and assist in the resolution process

# Empowerment of the target

## - At home

- Parents can encourage their children to tell at home
- Young people are more inclined to tell parents who can manage their own distress
- Frequently the parents become so distressed (understandably) when they hear that their offspring is being bullied that they are unable to effectively support their children
- Victims who tell their parents may request them not to 'tell the school' or 'not to do anything'
- If the parent supports them by not going over their heads, the young person may feel psychologically safe in telling. They may slowly give parents permission to inform school personnel once they feel confident that they will be kept safe
- The distress of parents can be mitigated when they have confidence in the school's anti-bullying programme
- All involved need to understand that resolution of bullying is a process not an event

# Empowerment of the target

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## - At home

- The empowerment process can be engaged in by the parent if they give the young person time and support to process their experience
- They may then receive the young persons permission to tell school personnel in confidence initially. The young person can also be encouraged to speak in confidence to student support team
- Parents can also begin the process of building a support network around the young person. This encourages them to 'tell' at a pace that they can tolerate
- Maintaining confidentiality is vital in allowing the young person to feel safe to 'tell'

# How parents can encourage 'telling'

- As the circle of support begins to widen, the victim begins to feel psychologically safe and more empowered
- They start to speak about their experience, and their isolation begins to decrease
- As they tell trusted friends and trusted teachers (often in confidence) the support structure around them strengthens
- The power balance in the peer group begins to shift, as other students become less afraid to support the victim

## The Problem

- Bullying exists in all schools
- 85% of teenagers do not report
- Students can be unhappy and no one knows why
- It transfers seamlessly from Primary to Secondary school
- Hidden relationship dynamics exist in classrooms where teachers are attempting to teach

## The Solution

- Students answer a simple teamwork question
- Statistical analysis conducted on the data and Sociometric Report presented to Teachers, allowing them to access classroom relationship dynamics and identify vulnerable students
- Cutting edge, in-depth training is provided for teachers on how to manage bullying and support students based on Report

## The Benefits

- Parent / school conflicts are removed
- Teachers have data to ensure psychological safety of students and create balance and harmony in class
- An ongoing platform to continually assess classroom balance
- Students leave school confident and resilient

*The Helping Hands Anti-Bullying programme is now available to schools*

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