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ANNOTATION

Bullying

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Key words: bullying; sensitive children; victims.

The invitation to write this paper raised a number of difficulties for me. I was aware, of course, that what was in the frame of discussion was the behaviour of children. Secondly, the major focus is on the protection of anxious children from other children with conduct difficulties or just garden-variety playground insensitivity. There are some excellent websites that address these issues¹ and some recent Finnish longitudinal research^{2,3} that is the first of its kind, which broadly summarised says the following:

- 1 There is a substantial increase in psychopathology in both young men and women almost two decades after being frequently bullied at age 8 years, with anxiety disorders, depression and conduct disorder, all increased.
- 2 There is a substantial increase in psychopathology for both young men and women almost two decades after doing the bullying at age 8 years.
- 3 There is a substantial increase in suicide attempts and completed suicide in young adult women who have been frequently bullied even after adjusting for depression and conduct disorder.
- 4 There were increased rates of suicide and attempted suicide in young men (including bullies, victims and boys who were both bullies and victims at age 8 years), but the increase disappeared when depression and conduct disorder were taken into account.

There are at least five main emphases in the management of bullying, which include the following:

- 1 Special targeting of girls who are frequently victimised for prevention programmes may reduce completed suicide in young adult women by up to 10%.³

Key Points

- 1 Bullying is associated with a very morbidity and mortality, especially in girls.
- 2 Bullying is helped by helping positive interactions not negative consequences.
- 3 Bullying is first and foremost an adult problem.

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Accepted for publication September 2009.

- 2 Teaching children ways to avoid being bullied is likely to be more effective than attempting to reducing bullying behaviour.⁴
- 3 Teaching problem-solving skills and positive interaction skills are likely to be as, or more, helpful than programmes that emphasise rules and consequences to discourage bullying.⁴
- 4 Most interventions help a little if implemented thoroughly. Most are not implemented thoroughly.
- 5 Cyber bullying must now be considered as part of the spectrum of bullying behaviour.¹

However, I would like to be strategically obtuse for a moment in order to address the problem without respect to children alone and without the inevitable recourse to vulnerable targets and less obviously, vulnerable perpetrators. These areas have been discussed for so long in the literature and in the popular wisdom that I do not believe I have anything new to offer.

Over the last 3 years, I have been working in the juvenile detention centres in New South Wales, where around 400 children at any one time, aged 10–18 years, are detained on remand or with custodial orders. Over 90% are male and 50–60% indigenous. Those 20% with severe mental illness have an almost 90% recidivism rate, which swamps even aboriginality as a risk factor for re-offending and return to detention (J Kasinathan, C Gaskin, KP Nunn, pers. comm., 2009).⁵ Now, you might ask, what has this to do with the issue of bullying?

The first answer to this question is, 'Here is a group of serious young bullies – what do they teach us?'

The second answer is, 'Here is a group of the most vulnerable young people in the state – what do they teach us?'

The third answer is, 'If we consider, for just a brief time, life from their perspective, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the "successful" bullies are their heroes and those admired by the rest of society.'

Where does this leave us on the subject of bullying? Each weekend, players of various sports and codes within sports are shown on national television committing acts of violence that when committed by boys and girls in detention, lead to several more months in custody. The zero tolerance of various levels of government has no sway on the football field and no impact on sledging behaviour in cricket. On the basis of much less evidence of assault, sexual assault and antisocial behaviour, which is regularly portrayed as endemic within rugby, young people are being detained for sometimes months at a time while their

heroes might receive a suspension from a match or a fine. Illicit substances and alcohol use, occasioning antisocial behaviour of one sort or another, is regularly responded to with a public apology of questionable sincerity, wrested out of them by their paymasters, and a quiet *sotto voce* 'boys will be boys . . . all part of the game you know'. Meanwhile, publicly represented young people, mostly indigenous, who have very much more justification to feel that life has not treated them well, receive serious orders against them resulting in detention.

I am not criticising the judiciary or the police who have very limited options placed before them in relation to these matters. I am not even criticising football clubs, which provide some of the only social fabric activities for much of the community. No, it is a self-reflective process that I think is worthwhile.

What do they teach us? Bullies emerge within systems that bully. The glorification of bullying behaviour in the adult population is so endemic within the media, the business culture and the governance of public administration that our preoccupation with bullying among children is almost incomprehensible. On a regular basis, I speak to colleagues who have been systematically bullied in the workplace by the very people responsible for the implementation of an anti-bullying policy. Bullies are not only tolerated but often promoted because they will do the unpleasant work of bullying.

Over the last 2 years, I have watched children and young people detained by a society that has tolerated their parents' abuse, neglect and victimisation of their children. The same society has responded by offering the most tenuous of thera-

peutic services for mentally ill children with incarceration of the victims as the main alternative. I am part of that society along with all our readers. By all means, let us respond to bullying in children by whatever means is at our disposal. However, let us not pretend that this is just a child's problem. We adults have to get our act together and work out what is acceptable and then let the children know we have finally accomplished something to show we are serious.

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