

Talking to stop bullying

ET explores a new, effective method of dealing with bullying



It's hard to know what to do when bullying happens. But, encouragingly, a new method of dealing with some types of bullying, trialed recently by Prof Ken Rigby of the University of South Australia and fellow NCAB member Ms Coosje Griffiths, has shown some great results when applied well.

Suited to cases in which there is some group involvement, serious but falling short of the criminal, applying the *Method of Shared Concern*, an idea from Swedish psychologist Anatol Pikas, resulted in a positive outcome in the vast majority of cases – in a small sample of 17 cases of bullying where the method was applied, 90 per cent were resolved.

Often the first response to a case of bullying is to punish, which Rigby agrees may well be appropriate in some cases. *The Method of Shared Concern*, though, advocates a non-punitive approach.

The reasoning is quite straightforward, if the parties involved aren't wary of being punished a dialogue can be established and the problem fully explored.

While it's easy to point the finger, often there's more to an issue than meets the eye, ready definitions of bully and victim can be over simple.

"In around 20 per cent of cases there's an element of provocation from the perceived victim toward the bullies," Rigby says.

He says that often teachers aren't very good at dealing with a case of bullying, "Only around 30 per cent of children who are being bullied will go to a teacher, 50 per cent of those cases won't be improved by the teacher and in 10 per cent, the teacher will actually worsen the situation."

The first step is to collect information about who is probably involved. Commonly this is based on reports rather than direct observations. Interviews with each of the suspected bullies are conducted in private.

"The practitioner makes it clear that no one is about to be punished and focuses on getting the parties involved to recognise the plight of the victim and to indicate what he or she is prepared to do to improve the situation and identify what it is that they think can be done. A one-to-one approach seems to work best," Rigby says. Once progress has been demonstrated – and the victim interviewed – the suspected bullies are brought together as a group to plan with the practitioner how they will bring about a resolution of the problem when they meet subsequently with the victim. At this final meeting the practitioner helps them to negotiate a sustainable solution.

Depending on the complexity of the

situation, several meetings might be required before the problem is fully understood.

Once everyone is across the issue, the final stage is for victim and bully to be brought together and an approach suitable to both arrived at.

"The resolution might be as simple as both parties agreeing to stay out of each other's way. We found that a thorough exploration of the problem makes for a lasting outcome," Prof Rigby says.

The method does have its drawbacks, it is time consuming, requiring several interviews across at least a week. The result also relies heavily on the practitioner being adequately trained in using the method.

"The required skills to use the method can be learned, we foresee that the role would be undertaken by a school counselor."

Bullying isn't confined to students bullying students. In one of the cases he explored for the study, Prof Rigby used the approach to mediate a case of students bullying a teacher.

"Students in a special school were making life hard for a teacher there, calling him names, which had really upset him. The students were asked what could be done, sharing their concern, which made them recognise the consequences of their actions. Eventually, the students apologised and the problem was resolved."

It didn't work in every case though, "In one school we visited a student had been making racist remarks about Italians. The school had a large number of Italian students who were offended by his remarks; their parents too became involved and the situation became difficult to resolve. The whole situation simply was not adequately resolved," Rigby says.

So the method isn't applicable to every situation and Rigby says that a

counselor should have several approaches in their arsenal when it comes to dealing with bullying.

In the current thinking, the six major intervention methods are; the traditional disciplinary approach, strengthening the victim, mediation, restorative practice, the support group method and the method of shared concern.

Rigby explores those issues in more detail in his latest book: *Bullying Interventions in Schools: Six Basic Approaches*. Camberwell ACER.

Prof Rigby says that his review of published studies in this area indicates that in many countries the employment of anti-bullying programs has led to a significant reduction in the prevalence of school bullying.

Ken Rigby



Ken Rigby is an Adjunct Research Professor and an educational consultant based at the University of South Australia. He has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Adelaide. Since 1990 he has been engaged in a series of studies of bullying in schools and has published widely in this area. His books include *Bullying in Schools and What to do About it*, *New Perspectives on Bullying and Children and Bullying; how Parents and Educators can Reduce Bullying in Schools*.



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