

# childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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**We have moved to  
2/606 Sherwood  
Rd, Sherwood**

## Special points of interest:

- At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties
- All *childpsych* psychologists are trained as specialist psychologists
- To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

## Coping with Bullying

There has been a lot of discussion in the popular media about bullying. From our perspective, schools have long attempted to manage issues of bullying by developing school wide behaviour management policies and programs. Unfortunately, as child psychologists we have often treated children who have symptoms of trauma, depression and anxiety as a result of prolonged bullying. Victims of bullying, therefore, are at risk of mental health problems. In fact, long-term research studies have shown that bullying can *cause* poor mental health years later.

### What is bullying?

Bullying is defined as a form of aggression where one or more children attempt to do harm to another child. More importantly, bullying is defined as a power imbalance between the bully and victim where the bully is either physically or psychologically more powerful.

### Differences between boys and girls

Not surprisingly there tends to be differences in how boys and girls bully. In general, girls seem to use more indirect means of bullying such as ignoring, and boys use more direct means such as physical intimidation. Which form of bullying causes the most psychological damage? It appears that indirect forms of bullying – being excluded from a friendship group, being teased and so on, are more damaging. Possibly



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because this form of bullying gets at the core of a child's self esteem. Being teased repeatedly day after day will eventually cause a child to second guess their worth as a person. Psychologists who have researched in this area have shown that children who are the victims of indirect bullying are more likely to experience anxiety and withdraw from social contact as well as not seek help. Help-seeking behaviour is an important part of coping with being bullied. Children who do not ask for help often feel powerless. In fact this sort of coping can often maintain the cycle of being bullied. However, "fighting back aggressively" (either physically or verbally) is also likely to prolong being bullied. In our psychology practice we actively discourage children from physically retaliating unless they are trying to defend themselves.

It appears girls are more likely than boys to resort to coping strategies where they engage in wishful thinking (hoping it will all go away) and other approaches that involve "putting one's head

in the sand". In turn, as the bullying continued these same children were more likely to feel as though the bullying would never end. As you can see, the way in which children cope with being bullied can set them up for how long the bullying can continue for and in turn leave them feeling powerless.

### Taking a solution orientated approach

Instead, it appears that using a solution-orientated approach to bullying is the best strategy. This means that children try and solve their problem were more likely to feel in control, end the bullying sooner and be less distressed or psychologically harmed by the experience. Obviously, most children will require the assistance of adults to cope with being bullied and the bully themselves needs to be managed. Parents can share their experiences and provide suggestions but it is important that children begin to think of solutions for themselves. In this way we are empowering the child and giving them a sense of control. However, indirect forms of bullying can be challenging to prove at times.

Therefore, it is important to help children learn to cope, and manage the bullying experience. We all know that some adults bully other adults!

*Continue over...*

CHILDPSYCH:PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

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“Many parents make the mistake of thinking they can change a child’s temperament through the use of discipline and rewards. While we can certainly manage our child’s temperament (and our own), we can never really completely change it.”

We're on the web  
www.childpsych.net.au

### Bullying con't

#### A case example

John was a 14-year-old student. He was referred to our practice by his General Practitioner who was concerned that John was depressed as a result of long term bullying. John was certainly unhappy and distressed but was not depressed. Once a typically popular student in primary school, his move to a high school without friends resulted in him making friends with some boys who later began to tease him. A sensitive boy, who had a slight stutter, John attempted to ignore the bullies as they teased him, but when this strategy did not work he began avoiding them at school till eventually he was spending his lunch hours in the library alone or in a part of the school where students rarely went (a stairwell). As a result of this strategy, John was becoming more isolated from his peer group, less likely to make new friends

and beginning to question his worth as a person. The parents had approached the school, who had in turn spoken to the bullies but this did not seem to stop them. Things were worsened by John failing to report every instance of bullying to the school so that they could take action.

John’s case illustrates how he responded to indirect bullying by avoiding dealing with the problem. The aim of John’s psychology treatment was to help him first take charge of being bullied, make new friends and develop resilience skills to improve his mental health. Through counselling sessions, John was able to learn strategies to deal with the bullies (who ended up expelled) accept himself (his self esteem was very low) and begin to forge a new life for him.

#### What you can do

As adults you can do the following to help your child if they are being bullied:

- Sit down with the child and develop an action plan for dealing with the bully(ies). Make sure you check how they are progressing with managing the bully and implementing their plan.
- Do not hesitate to seek professional help if the child appears to be suffering. Signs of distress are sleep problems, anxiety and keeping to one’s self.
- Speak to the school management team about your concerns and what is going on. In some drastic cases, parents have approached the police.
- In drastic cases of prolonged bullying, after you have spoken with the school and attempted all possible avenues, consider changing schools

## Understanding a Child’s Temperament

Spend time at your local park and observe the way in which each child behaves and responds to objects and events. Each child behaves uniquely – some will cautiously climb up the slide, while others will rush up the ladder and launch themselves down.

“Temperament” is the term we use to refer to a person’s *style of behaviour*. How a person’s temperament is shaped by life experiences is what we tend to call “personality”. Temperament can be thought of as inborn or inherited.

Many parents make the mistake of thinking they can change a child’s temperament through the use of discipline and rewards. While we can certainly manage our child’s temperament (and our own), we can never really completely change it. Therefore it is important to try and improve the fit between a child’s temperament and their various environments (school, home etc). A failure to ensure a good fit between the child’s temperament and their environment

can lead to mis diagnosis, health and behavioural problems. For example, an overly active child may have trouble sitting still in a typical classroom and may be mis diagnosed as ADHD in the absence of any brain abnormality (the cause of ADHD). It is important to note that a “good fit” means that the expecta-



tions of the adults are in keeping with the capabilities of the child. For example, an overly active child may be given extra breaks during a classroom lesson and extra time to settle down after a play break.

So what characterises temperament? It is generally agreed by researchers that there are nine temperament traits. These are such things as your energy level, ability to

adapt to changes in your environment, comfort with new experiences, persistence/attention and mood. So you can imagine that a temperamentally challenging infant is one who exhibits behaviours such as a poor sleep-wake cycle, is excessively distressed when held by anyone other than the mother, is difficult to settle and so on. I should point out that it is important not to confuse the symptoms of a medical condition, such as reflux, with your infant’s temperament.

It is important to think of a temperament trait as having both negative and positive aspects. For example, a child who is highly active (not hyperactive) can be easily distracted from a school task but by the same token actively explores their environment. Try not to label your child’s behaviour using descriptive phrases such as “lazy”, “stubborn” and so on. Think about your child’s behaviour in terms of temperament!