

Prejudice-motivated bullying and its impact on child mental health and wellbeing

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

Key messages

Along with key health and wellbeing issues associated with bullying, a child experiencing prejudice-motivated bullying may also:

- feel self-hatred or shame about their identity or their family's identity
- attempt to distance themselves from these identities
- experience a lack of connection and belonging
- feel a diminished sense of safety at school and other social situations. This is likely to be accompanied by high vigilance and anxiety about attending these places.

To support the child and their parents and carers, you can:

- validate the child's experience by talking about, naming and acknowledging the type of discrimination that they are experiencing (e.g. racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia)
- encourage reporting of the bullying (but don't leave this all up to the child)
- discuss with the parents and carers the impact of bullying on their child
- ensure the child maintains agency and control over their experience by supporting them to develop coping strategies



- facilitate connection and belonging by linking the child and their family to peer support groups and identifying positive role models
- encourage pride by helping the child to understand the positive aspects and strengths connected to their identity or community
- help them to integrate these positive aspects into their sense of self so that the bullying doesn't define them
- remind the child that their identity is something that they can celebrate, and that the cause of the problem lies with other people's misperceptions and prejudices.

This paper is designed for generalist practitioners working directly with children, parents and/or families. It aims to raise awareness of and build your confidence in directly addressing prejudice-motivated bullying with children and their parents and carers.

Topics such as racism, homophobia, transphobia or ableism are not always easy to talk about; and so the intention here is to encourage an exploration with children, their parents and carers about how bullying or discrimination based on personal characteristics such as race, ability, gender or sexuality might be affecting them.

What is prejudice-based bullying, and how common is it?

Prejudice-based bullying is also known as 'interpersonal discrimination', 'harassment' and 'victimisation' and can specifically be called racism, ableism, homophobia or transphobia.

It is based on attributes which can be real or perceived by both victim and perpetrator. For example, a child can be bullied because someone 'thinks' that they are gay, even if they are not.

Some children may also be subjected to bullying because of a caregiver's attribute – for example, a child who has a parent that is living with a disability, or who has same-sex parents.

Research indicates how widespread the issue of prejudice-based bullying is likely to be. For example:

- **Racism:** The Speak Out Against Racism study (Priest et al., 2017), which explored the experiences, attitudes and intended behaviours of years 5–9 students in NSW and Victoria (n=4,664), showed that about one-third (31%) of students reported racial discrimination carried out by peers. Students born overseas reported twice the number of experiences of racial discrimination than students born in Australia.
- **Homophobia/Transphobia:** The *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al., 2010) showed that of 3,134 same-sex attracted and gender questioning young people (aged 14–21 years old) who participated, 61% reported verbal abuse and 18% reported physical abuse because of homophobia, with school being the most likely place of abuse (80% of those abused).¹
- **Ableism:** For school-aged students with a disability, a 2019 report by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA, 2019) showed that almost half (46%) of survey respondents (n=242) had been bullied at school by other students, including 9% who reported that they had been bullied by teachers, principals and/or other school staff.

These incidents can be compounded by the systemic and sometimes indirect forms of discrimination that a child and their family can experience. For example, families having difficulty accessing adequate support for their child living with a disability can experience this as a form of systemic discrimination. This can impact on the mental wellbeing of the whole family.

Another example is where parents may have their own experiences of racism and, as a result, are less resilient or positive about their ability to address it for their children. This might also impact on a family's decision to access services where they may have had negative experiences in the past.

What is the impact of bullying?

Bullying can significantly impact upon a child's health and wellbeing and is a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes such as depression (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018), anxiety (Kim, Lee, Lee, Han, Min, Song, et al., 2015) and suicidal thoughts (Feng, Waldner, Cushon, Davy & Neudorf, 2016).

Children may also become more withdrawn at school or at home, which in turn affects their confidence and ability to develop friendships and trusting relationships, further diminishing their sense of connection and belonging (Lamb et al 2009).

It has been found that "bullying not only remains a serious threat to children's physical wellbeing during the time they are involved, it also can persist for many years into adulthood." (Zhang et al 2017, p.4)

How is prejudice-based bullying different?

Internalisation

One of the main impacts of prejudice-based bullying can be an internalisation of the negative messages that children hear, which results in shame about their identity. Rather than learning how to positively integrate the attribute that is the focus of the bullying into their identity, a child experiencing this type of bullying may take on these negative messages, which in turn can negatively affect their self-image, self-esteem and wellbeing (Mercedo et al 2019).

Known as 'internalising', this can be referred to as internalised racism, internalised ableism or internalised homophobia or transphobia. Dana Iyer (2013) writes that, "when a target internalises the negative comments and attitudes expressed, believing the taunts to be reflective of a personal truth about herself, it can lead her to denigrate herself, her culture, and those belonging to it, while trying to mitigate aspects of herself that draw attention to her disparaged differences." (Accessed 13/11/19)

The child may also be less likely to report incidents of bullying because they may be embarrassed and feel shame about the negative labels being connected to their identity. For example, if they sense that there is a stigma associated with being gay in their family, and they are being bullied for this, they may be reluctant to tell their parents due to concerns that they will not be accepted at home.

¹ No data for same-sex attracted or gender questioning children aged 12 years and under could be found.

Scenario – Internalisation

Samantha is 11 years old and has mild cerebral palsy (CP). You are the family's GP and have been seeing her since she was a baby. When she was seven years old, you encouraged her to join the local swimming club as the swimming would be helpful for managing her CP symptoms. Samantha has always reported that she really loves going.

At Samantha's last visit, you asked her how she was enjoying swimming, and she said she hates it because she is no good and always comes last. Her dad says that it has been harder to get her to go, but thinks it is just a phase.

- What might trigger you to ask questions about prejudice-motivated bullying?
- What sorts of questions should you ask Samantha about why she is feeling this way?
- How comfortable would you feel in asking questions about this?
- What should you do next?

Microaggressions

Dr Fiona Kumari-Campbell writing about disability says that "from the moment a child is born, she emerges into a world where she receives messages that to be disabled is to be less than... a world where disability may be tolerated but in the final instance, is inherently negative." (Kumari-Campbell, 2008, p.1)

Sometimes these messages are overt, but often they are delivered through more covert forms of discrimination and harassment, known as 'microaggressions'. These are the persistent, frequent, subtle and sometimes unintentional discriminatory messages and actions that a person experiences and that are associated with them being 'different' or 'not normal'.

Microaggressions will often go unnoticed by those not experiencing them and may be difficult for a child to explain. This can influence the child's motivation to report these incidences. Things like being constantly excluded, overhearing jokes about their attribute, or not being able to participate because an activity hasn't considered their abilities can all be experienced as microaggressions.

This accumulation of negative messaging is harmful to a child's sense of wellbeing, connection and belonging.

In an article in *The Conversation*, Associate Professor Naomi Priest notes that "children need support to develop the cognitive and emotional skills required for positive cultural attitudes and to negotiate successfully the complex intercultural context of our increasingly diverse world. This includes learning to navigate the messages they receive from politicians, the media, social media and friends and families about racism and cultural diversity." (Priest, 2016)

Scenario – Microaggressions

Thon is in Grade 5. He came with his family to Australia as a refugee when he was three years old. He has been raised to be proud of his Sudanese heritage, and at home his family speak with each other in Arabic.

Recently, Thon has been getting into fights at school and refuses to speak Arabic at home. Sometimes he won't eat dinner, saying he doesn't want to eat that "weird food". Thon's mum has brought him to see you because she is having trouble getting him to go to school and is worried about his behaviour.

- What might trigger you to ask questions about prejudice-motivated bullying?
- What sorts of questions should you ask Thon about school?
- How comfortable would you feel in asking questions about this?
- What role do you think microaggressions might be playing in Thon's experience?
- What should you do next?

Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups." (Source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>)

When a child is part of more than one group or identity, they can face multiple forms of bullying and layers of discrimination. Facilitating a discussion with the child and their parents and carers about how these identities intersect and impact upon each other will help to develop a more holistic response for the child. You can explore whether they are experiencing discrimination or prejudice-motivated bullying across these different identities.

Scenario – Intersectionality

Nathan is 11 years old and has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). His mum has brought him in to see you because of Nathan's frequent complaints of a sore tummy and headaches, which have resulted in several days off from school.

Nathan is very creative; he loves to dance, draw and write stories. His mum says that he has become quite withdrawn and that it has been difficult to get him to the dance class that he used to love. You ask Nathan about his friends and he says he doesn't have many friends, and that the boys have started calling him 'gay', saying that he acts too much like a girl.

- What might trigger you to ask questions about prejudice-motivated bullying?
- What might you need to do in order to create a safe space to further this conversation?
- What might be worrying or difficult for Nathan about this conversation?
- How could you make sure that Nathan felt safe to talk about whether he was gay or not?
- Do you think Nathan's disability might impact on him developing an understanding of his sexual orientation? If Nathan did think he was attracted to other boys, what supports might he need?
- How can you encourage Nathan to stay involved in the hobbies that he enjoys?

To facilitate a deeper conversation about prejudice-motivated bullying, you can:

Openly discuss the discrimination

- Name the issue and discuss with the child how they feel about it. You should ask directly whether the child is experiencing bullying because of a particular attribute. This may be a relief for the child as it can provide a safe space for them to open up about their experiences.
- Don't ignore it or tell the child to ignore it, as this may reinforce the discrimination.
- Affirm that discrimination is never OK.

Facilitate personal agency and control

- Help the child to develop some agency and control over their experience by supporting them to develop strategies to deal with it. Research shows that when a person is experiencing discrimination, opportunities for self-advocacy and agency and developing personal mastery can act as protective factors (Johns et al., 2018).
- You can also ask the child questions like:
 - “Now that we're talking about bullying, what can I do to help?”
 - “Is your school [or club] doing anything to prevent bullying?”
 - “What things do you think parents could/should do to help stop bullying?”
 - “What do you usually do when you are bullied?” (McClowry, 2017, p.86)
- Strategies could include things like:
 - making a plan with the child about how they will tell their teacher or coach about the bullying
 - helping the child to write a letter to their teacher or coach asking for support
 - working with the child and their parents on some ideas for change or action. These could include:
 - having a guest speaker
 - running some education sessions about diversity (see links to state and territory equal opportunity commissions which offer these sessions)
 - holding an art competition with the theme of celebrating diversity; or
 - working on a list about what the child would like to see changed, to share with the adults in charge at their club or school.

Talking about prejudice-motivated bullying

Part of your role is to help the child and their parents develop a positive sense of self and pride in their identity, by helping them to understand that the messages being sent to them through prejudice-based bullying do not have to define them. As discussed earlier, ensuring that children don't internalise the negative messages they are hearing is crucial for aiding positive identity formation.

In the first instance, if you suspect a child is experiencing bullying, Lamb et al (2009) suggest using this list of questions to begin to gather some details about the nature of the bullying:

- “How often are you bullied?”
- “How long have you been bullied?”
- “Where are you bullied?” (E.g. school, sports, home, neighbourhood)
- “How are you bullied?” (E.g. hitting, insults, gossiping, text messaging)
- “How do you feel when you are bullied?”

Encourage connection and belonging

Samara et al (2019), found that “while refugee children were found to be at risk on various levels...social relationships including friendship quality and number of friends played an essential protective role.” (p.17)
This can be achieved by:

- encouraging connection and belonging by finding peer support groups. This can help to empower the child and their family and be a safe space where they can share their stories and hear from others about how they approached and dealt with their situation
- exploring whether there are any people and peers that are supportive of the child, and how they might be able to play a more active role in being a good ally.

Reframe the negative messages

An important part of the conversation you have with the child is to help them reframe the negative messages they will have heard from the bullies – e.g. “you are not able enough”, “too different”, “weird”, “not normal”, “not good”. These messages can all contribute to a negative sense of self and belonging, and a lack of agency and control. To reframe the messages:

- Help the child to understand that it is the stereotypes and biases associated with these characteristics or attributes which are the cause of the problem, rather than assuming that the child is behaving in ways that invites rejection and exclusion – as is sometimes implied when interventions such as social skills training for the ‘victim’ are employed (Killen, 2013).
- Ask some questions and help the child to make a list of things they can be proud of about this part of their identity.
- Suggest some people with this attribute (e.g. celebrities, sportspeople) and talk about how they can be positive role models for the child.

Get parents and adults involved

- Don't leave the full responsibility for reporting the discrimination to the child, but also don't take the opportunity away from them. Encourage the parents or a trusted adult to advocate with the child. Parents and carers play a significant role in supporting their child through this experience.
- Provide the parents and carers with direct, clear information about bullying and its impact so that they are better able to engage in shared decision-making. It is important that parents and carers participate in the plan, which will ultimately improve their child's overall health (Stephens et al., 2018).
- Some parents from multicultural or multi-faith backgrounds, or those who are newly arrived may feel uncomfortable challenging institutions like schools and may have added language barriers. You may need to arrange for the use of an interpreter and find resources which have been translated.

- Tell the parent that they may have to follow up on the complaint and be persistent, as the school or club may not deal with it immediately or adequately (Rigby, K., accessed 13/11/19).

Encourage reporting

- Remind parents that they have a right to advocate for their children. This could be particularly relevant for parents who also experienced this type of bullying or discrimination as children or as adults.
- Encourage reporting to relevant people where the bullying is occurring, like the coach (if sports-related) or teacher or year-level coordinator (if school-related). You could ask questions like:
 - “Tell me about the school's [or place where it is occurring] rules and programs against bullying. Is there someone from your school [or place where it is occurring] I could contact about bullying?” (McClowry, R., 2017, p.86)
- If the school or club does not respond adequately, you may need to suggest that the family contacts the relevant state education department or anti-discrimination or human rights commission for further support (see ‘Extra support and information’ at the end of this resource).

Provide ongoing support and treatment as appropriate

- Once bullying has been identified, it is important to screen for comorbid disorders, such as depression and anxiety, and provide treatment as appropriate (Stephens et al, 2018).

How safe and inclusive are your services?

It is also important to think about how welcoming, safe and inclusive your service is, especially since children and their families may have encountered barriers to accessing services.

- What can your service do to address any structural barriers that may exist?
- Are there visible signs to show that your service is welcoming and inclusive and celebrates diversity?
- Perhaps you could ask the child about what things they would like to see in your service to make it feel more friendly and welcoming to them?

Conclusion

Support for a child who is experiencing bullying should engage a range of professionals and community groups including GPs, mental health professionals, teachers and school communities, social clubs, and of course, parents and carers. Children cannot be expected to deal with bullying on their own.

The most important outcome of any conversation with a child about this type of bullying is that they understand that the actual problem or issue lies with the person doing the bullying, and not with them or any aspect of their identity for which they are being bullied. By naming the discrimination and letting the child know that discrimination is wrong and against the law, you will help to alleviate shame and support the development of a sense of pride in their identity.



Extra support and information

Education

For links to all state and territory education departments go to: <https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/RespondingToBullying/Pages/Legislation-and-policy.aspx>

Legal support and advice

Youth Law Australia (YLA) is a community legal service dedicated to helping children and young people in Australia and their supporters find a legal solution to their problems. YLA provides free and confidential legal advice, assistance and referrals to young people and their advocates. Anyone under 25 (and their advocate) can request and receive free and confidential legal advice through their online service that is available 24/7. They provide this service to all children, young people and their advocates across Australia.

Equal opportunity or human rights commissions

Each state and territory has an equal opportunity or human rights commission or something equivalent. They can provide advice and information about what to do if a school or institution is not responding to prejudice-based bullying and/or discrimination. They also provide training and education, handle complaints, and help to reconcile matters of discrimination and harassment.

Australian Capital Territory

Australian Capital Territory Human Rights Commission

<https://hrc.act.gov.au/>

New South Wales

Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW

<https://www.antidiscrimination.justice.nsw.gov.au/>

Northern Territory

Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commission

<https://adc.nt.gov.au/>

South Australia

Equal Opportunity Commission

<https://eoc.sa.gov.au/>

Tasmania

Equal Opportunity Tasmania

<https://equalopportunity.tas.gov.au/>

Victoria

Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

<https://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/>

Western Australia

Equal Opportunity Commission

<https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/equal-opportunity-commission>

Queensland

Queensland Human Rights Commission

<https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/>