

Bullying Prevention and Mental Wellbeing

Introduction

Bullying is a form of harmful behaviour which can have long-term impacts on the wellbeing of individuals, communities and society. Bullying can be reduced in environments where all people feel safe, valued and connected. Events such as Pink Shirt Day are important in changing knowledge and attitudes associated with bullying. Pink Shirt Day is a national campaign that aims to reduce bullying in schools, workplaces and communities by encouraging the development of positive social relationships. It does this through a social marketing campaign, community engagement and the provision of information and resources.

This paper highlights the importance of positive relationships to mental wellbeing and explores evidence-based approaches which work towards reducing bullying, creating respectful behaviours and increasing our ability to flourish.

Definition of Bullying

Bullying is commonly defined as deliberately harmful behaviour, repeated over a period of time, by a person or group, who target and victimise a person in a less powerful position. Bullying behaviour can include physical or verbal assaults or indirect actions such as psychological manipulation. Bullying may be directed towards particular people on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, physical appearance, ability, gender or sexuality and can occur in any context where people interact with one another. This includes schools, workplaces, within the family and in neighbourhoods. At a broader level, bullying can exist between social groups and between nations. Ultimately, bullying is the deliberate misuse and imbalance of power in relationships (Carroll-Lind, 2009).

Current Situation

New Zealand experiences one of the highest rates of bullying in the world according to one study, where rates over 50% above the international average were found (Trends In International Mathematics and Science, 2010). Longitudinal studies have found that the long-term outcomes of being bullied can include social isolation, anxiety, depression and risk-taking behaviours. Bullying has negative impacts for all people concerned, not just the victims (Carroll-Lind, 2009). People who engage in bullying behaviour may experience low self-esteem and peer rejection and bystanders may perceive their environment as less safe or secure.

Positive Relationships and Mental Wellbeing

Evidence shows that feeling valued by and close to others is a fundamental human need which contributes to our ability to function well and live a good life (Roffey, 2012). The MHF utilises the Five Ways to Wellbeing report as a key document for the evidence base on activities that promote mental wellbeing. This report highlights the significance of strengthening connections between people. Positive, respectful relationships are one of the most significant sources of mental wellbeing. They also act as a buffer against mental ill health (Roffey, 2012; New Economics Foundation, 2008). It is important for our individual wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of others, to learn how to create positive connections. It is also important to understand why bullying behaviour occurs.

Theories on the Causes of Bullying

It is sometimes suggested that bullying is inherent in human behaviour, resulting from social survival strategies present in early human history. Related theories suggest that aggressive, competitive and dominating behaviours helped early humans to establish a pecking order and these traits remain in modern humans (Rigby 2002). On the other hand, reciprocity and social cooperation have also been identified as successful survival strategies in early human societies (Fehr, Fischbascher & Gächter, 2002).

Bullying is now more frequently understood as a socio-ecological phenomenon (Boyd & Barwick, 2011). That is, the cause and expression of bullying behaviours does not result simply from personality traits, but also from peer, family, school, community and societal factors (Griffith, Norman, O'Sullivan & Ali, 2011). Reducing bullying therefore needs to be addressed at all of these different levels and contexts.

Recommended Evidence-based Approaches

The most common response to reducing bullying is to apply strong punitive and disciplinary action for the bully. Research has shown that this approach often does not work to inspire positive patterns of behaviour (Griffith et al., 2011). More importantly, the MHF proposes that dealing with cases of bullying only after they have happened should not be the primary means of reducing bullying.

The MHF proposes that initiatives which work at a range of different levels to reduce inequalities and increase social and emotional competencies are more effective at reducing bullying than punitive approaches once bullying occurs (Jimerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2010). There are a range of initiatives that work to reduce bullying and which also impact on mental wellbeing, either intentionally or unintentionally. The following are some examples of initiatives that the MHF suggests can help to create positive relationships and improve our ability to live a good life.

Reducing Inequalities Research has shown that individual wellbeing cannot be disconnected from the wellbeing of populations (Roffey, 2012). If we are to reduce bullying we must tackle the structural conditions, such as the inequality that exists within our society. Inequalities perpetuate bullying behaviour (Moodie, 2008). Fairness is fundamental for the development of healthy relationships and a healthy society. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) conclude that the more equal a society, the greater the ability to support, share and collaborate with each other and therefore reduce bullying (Roffey, 2012). In addition to structural conditions, peers can have an influence on our behaviour.

Role modelling Role modelling positive behaviour is important to reducing bullying in a community and wider societal context as the behaviour of individuals is entrenched in social norms (Roffey, 2012; Griffith et al. 2011). By approaching relationships in a more respectful way we model positive behaviours that others can emulate. Christakis and Fowler (2010) have shown that people have the ability to 'catch' emotional states they observe in others. Building a context in which pro-social behaviour becomes second nature will require a collective effort by schools, workplaces, the media, politics and people in positions of

authority to commit to more respectful behaviour. Developing individual competencies is also important.

Social and emotional competencies Research indicates that social and emotional competencies can lead to greater wellbeing and improved relationships (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Taking time to consider the feelings of other people is likely to have a significant impact when it comes to promoting respectful relationships. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes (Griffith et al., 2011) An example of a programme which develops social and emotional competencies such as empathy is Roots of Empathy. Roots of Empathy is a programme where parents bring babies to the classroom to allow children to interact with them, celebrate their milestones and observe their development (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait & Hertzman 2011). Evaluations have shown that children who participate in the programme are more co-operative, kinder, more inclusive of others, less aggressive and less likely to bully Initiatives seeking to cultivate empathy can easily be transferred into a workplace or community context. Another activity that can be used in a range of contexts is mindfulness.

Mindfulness training Mindfulness is an activity that has been shown to reduce bullying behaviour and increase mental wellbeing through encouraging mindful attention, diminished self-talk and non-judgemental behaviour (Leary & Tate, 2007). Kabat-Zinn (1990) defines mindfulness as 'paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally' (p. 4). Evidence suggests that engaging in mindfulness practice may promote more effective ways of communicating with others as it helps to develop a creative, open and flexible way of processing information. It may also aid in the development of compassion.

Conclusion

Engagement in events such as Pink Shirt Day helps to showcase the importance of positive and respectful relationships in reducing bullying. Bullying occurs due to a range of factors including individual, peer, community and societal factors. Reducing inequalities, modelling positive behaviours, and encouraging mindfulness and social and emotional competencies are promoted by the MHF as they are evidence-based actions that can increase pro-social behaviours and contribute to mental wellbeing. The reduction of bullying will only come about through a collective effort from everyone.

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