

# Childhood bullying: How are parents coping?



## Poll report

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### Report highlights

- One in five (22%) Australian parents report that one or more of their children experienced bullying in the last school term
- One in four (23%) parents think bullying is a big problem at their child's school
- Only one in three (36%) parents think they can help make a difference to the reduction of bullying at their child's school and one in four (23%) were unaware of their child's school bullying policy
- Almost all (93%) teenagers have access to online communication, yet one in six (17%) parents have not spoken with their teen about how to protect themselves and others from cyberbullying and most parents (55%) are not confident that they could tell if their child was being bullied online
- Half of Australian parents (50%) feel like they need more information or guidance about how to protect their child from bullying

Bullying is when an individual or a group of people, repeatedly and intentionally cause hurt or harm to another person or group of people who feel helpless to respond. There are many different types of bullying, including physical bullying (such as hitting, kicking, tripping), verbal bullying (such as name calling, teasing, insults and intimidation), social bullying (such as lying and spreading rumours, purposeful exclusion) and online or cyberbullying (such as sharing or sending abusive or hurtful texts or images, imitating others online or deliberate exclusion online).

In a survey fielded in April 2018, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their knowledge, attitudes and experiences in relation to bullying and their children over the last school term.

Across a sample population of 1575 parents, data were collected on a total of 2548 children aged between five and less than 18 years (1535 primary school aged children and 1013 secondary school aged children). The median parent respondent age was 44 years and 54% were female. The median number of children per parent was two, and 52% of children were male.

## How common is bullying and how does it affect parents?

Parents were provided with a series of definitions and examples of different types of bullying and asked to indicate to the best of their knowledge whether their child had experienced any of these situations in the last

school term. One in five (22%) parents reported that one or more of their children experienced bullying in the last school term. Parents collectively reported that 18% of Australian school children have been bullied either at school or outside school in the last school term. Other research suggests many children will not tell their parents when they are being bullied, and so this is likely to be an underestimate of the true prevalence. According to parents, late primary school aged children or 'tweens' (aged 10 to 13 years) were slightly more likely to have been bullied (21%) as compared with early primary school aged children (14%) and teenagers (17%). There was no meaningful difference in parent reported prevalence of bullying for girls as compared with boys. Children with a physical or mental health disorder or disability were twice as likely to have been bullied than those without a disorder or disability, as reported by parents.

Among those children reported by their parents to have been bullied (n=447), verbal bullying was the most commonly experienced type (78%), followed by social (56%), physical (49%) and cyberbullying (30%). Most children who were bullied (79%) experienced two or more different types of bullying, with one in eight (12%) children experiencing all four types of bullying. Most children experienced bullying at school (85%) although more than a quarter (27%) experienced bullying outside of school (see figure 1).

Parents who reported that their child had been bullied experienced a range of feelings and responses including worry about the long-term effects (48%), anger (44%), frustration at being unable to help (44%), guilt for not

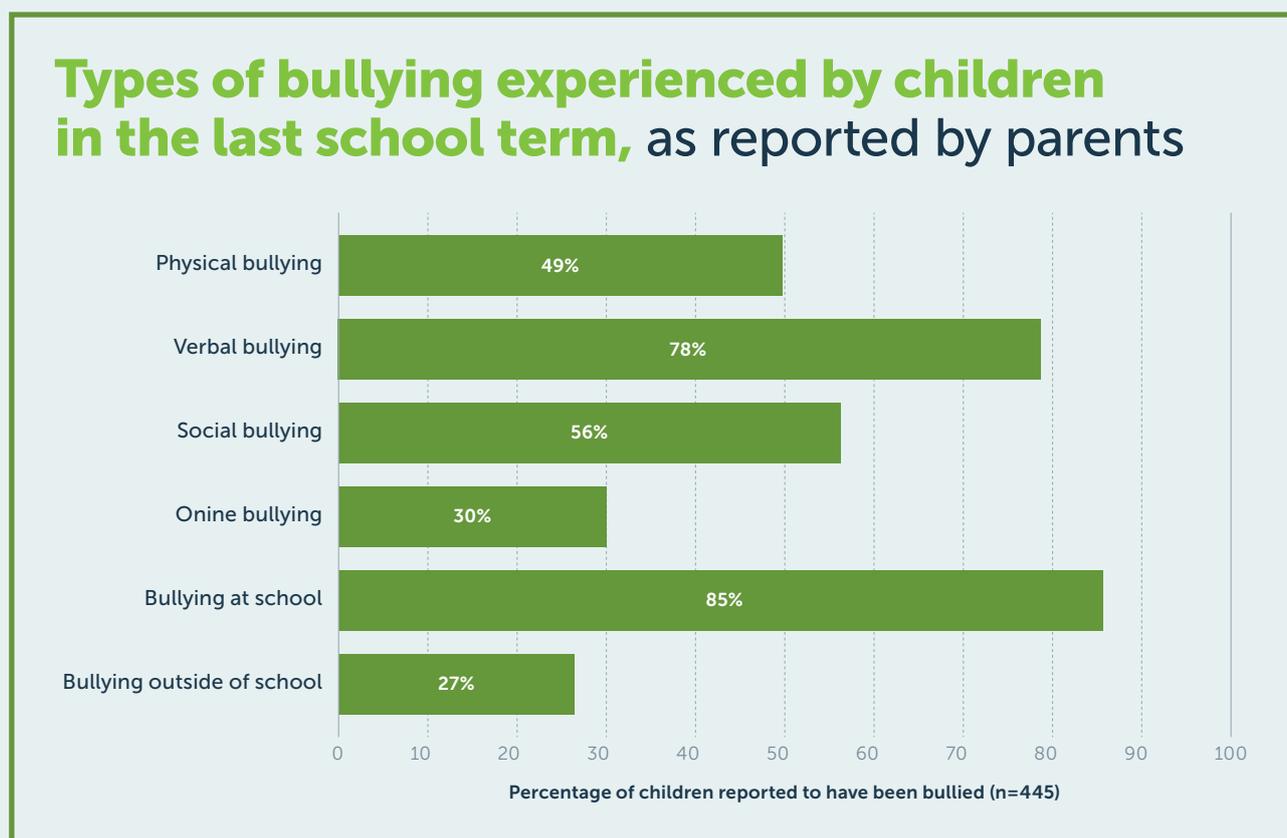


Figure 1.

being able to stop the bullying (32%), helplessness (28%), depression or anxiety (21%) and feeling physically sick (16%). Eighty-nine percent of parents reported that when a child is bullied it affects the whole family.

## What do parents know about bullying?

Overall most parents had good levels of knowledge about the definition, causes and consequences of bullying in children. Seventy-one per cent of parents knew that arguments or disagreements between children are not bullying but only 20% knew that random acts of aggression or intimidation are not bullying. These actions can cause great distress but they do not fit the definition of bullying because they are not repeated and on purpose. One in four parents (22%) thought that most bullying involves a child physically hurting another child, when in fact verbal and social bullying are both more common than physical bullying, especially among girls.

Seventy per cent of parents reported knowing that how parents raise their child can affect their chances of being involved in bullying. Most parents (90%) knew that bullying is not best ignored or left for children to sort out for themselves. Seventy-seven per cent of parents felt bullying can seriously affect onlookers and bystanders. The vast majority of parents reported knowing that bullying can lead to behaviour changes at home (95%), mental health problems like anxiety and depression (94%), school avoidance (94%), changes in sleeping or eating patterns (90%) and a drop in school performance (88%).

## How confident are parents in recognising bullying?

Despite having relatively good levels of knowledge about the signs and consequences of bullying, parents lack confidence that they would know if their own child was being bullied. Eighty-seven per cent of parents felt that bullying is often hidden from adults, with just one in five (22%) saying most kids would tell their parents if bullied. Other research also suggests that often children do not tell their parents about bullying.

Parents were most likely to be confident they would recognise physical bullying if it was happening to their child (70%), compared with verbal (53%), social (45%) or cyberbullying (45%). Forty-six per cent of parents were confident they would know if their child was bullying another child.

## What are parents' perceptions of bullying at their child's school?

Schools have a fundamental role to play in preventing and addressing bullying among children. One in four parents (23%) felt that bullying is a big problem at their

1 in 4 parents who have a child that has been bullied report feeling **helpless** to address the problem



child's school and only half of parents (48%) think that their child's school manages bullying well. A quarter (23%) of parents were unaware if their child's school had a bullying policy and only a third (36%) felt they could help make a difference to the reduction of bullying at their child's school. One in ten parents felt it was up to teachers, not parents, to educate children on how best to respond to bullying.

## How are parents coping and where are they going for help?

Half of all parents (50%) feel like they need more information or guidance about how to protect their child from bullying, with the need for more information being greater among parents of primary school aged children (59%) compared with parents of teenagers (45%). The preferred sources of this information for parents were through school (73%) and/or online (71%). Of note, one in five (22%) parents said they would prefer to get this information from their GP.

The majority of parents reported they would seek help from their child's school if their child was being bullied, including the school teacher (94%), school principal (90%) or school counsellor (84%). Other sources of potential help identified by parents included online resources (80%), friends and other parents (80%), counsellor or psychologist outside of school (57%) and the GP (37%).

Some actions, which are considered less productive and can actually aggravate bullying situations, were identified by some parents as strategies they would use to deal with bullying. More than half of parents (56%) said they would directly approach the parent or carer of the child doing the bullying and a third (36%) said they would be likely to directly approach the child doing the bullying.

One in three parents (32%) said they would keep their child home from school for a break from the bullying.

Many parents were aware of positive strategies to share with their children including encouraging their child to speak up and tell a teacher (94%), encouraging and helping their child to make new friends (76%), encouraging their child to tell the bully to stop (77%) and telling their child to seek help from other children (51%).

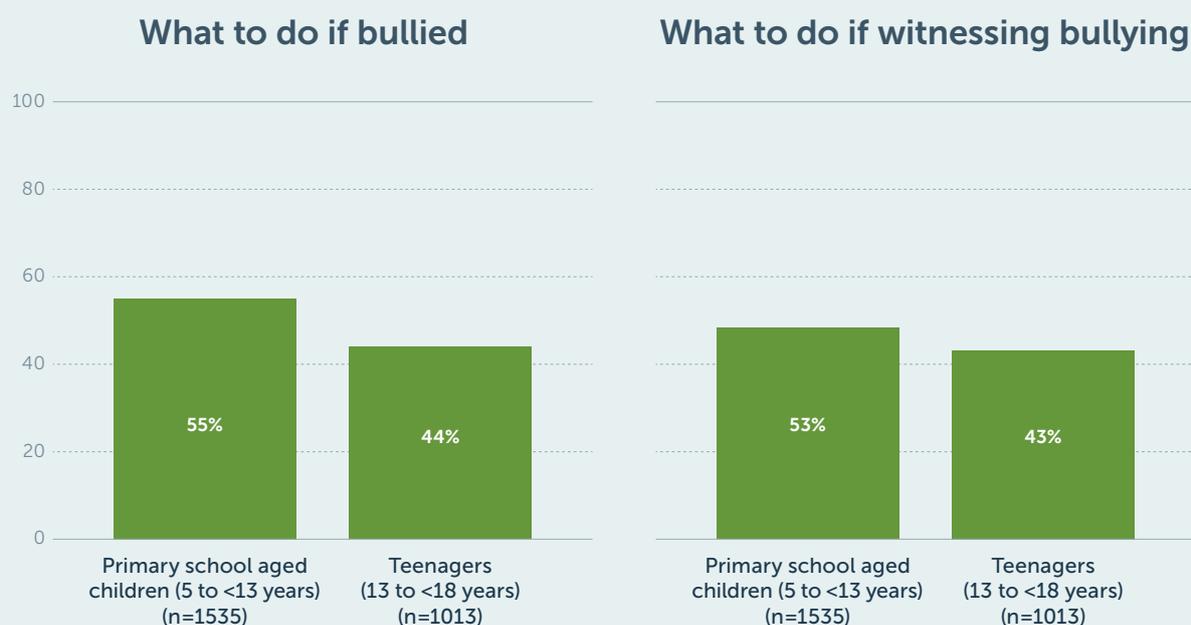
Among those parents who reported that their child had experienced bullying in the last school term, one in three said the bullying had happened online. There are several ways that parents can support their child to respond to cyberbullying. Nearly half (49%) of parents said they would stop their child using social media and 35% said they would remove their mobile phone access if they were experiencing cyberbullying. These strategies are considered less helpful as children are likely to find other ways to access online communication when their parents ban them from it. Also, they will be less likely to talk to their parents about what they are doing online as they fear getting in trouble. It is best for parents to talk with their child regularly about their online activities and help them to engage in appropriate online behaviour. Many parents were aware of helpful advice to address cyberbullying such as blocking or defriending the offender (90%), discussing the situation with a school staff member (83%), collecting evidence with screenshots (80%) and reporting inappropriate behaviour to the app or social media site (79%) or the eSafety Commissioner (60%).

## How often do parents and kids talk together to help protect against bullying?

Parents play a key role in the development of a child's social skills, emotional regulation and ability to have healthy relationships with others both on and offline. Regular parent-child communication about healthy and respectful relationships and what to do if they come across bullying behaviours can help to protect children from bullying. Most parents (89%) said they were confident they could talk to their child about bullying if they thought it was happening to them. Yet only half of parents (57%) felt confident that they would know what to do to help stop the bullying.

Almost three-quarters of parents (72%) said they talk with their child once a week or more about their friendships and relationships in general. Only half of parents (51%) said they had spoken with their child at least once this term about what to do if they were being bullied or what to do if they saw another child being bullied (49%), with these conversations more commonly reported among parents of primary school aged children than teenagers (see figure 2). One in six parents (17%) did not speak with their child in the last school term about protecting their privacy online, or provide any guidance to their child about sharing images and information about themselves and others online.

### Parent report of **bullying related discussions** with their child



Percentage of children who have discussed the topic with their parent at least once in the last school term.

Figure 2.

## Implications

Bullying is a health issue for the whole community. It is a serious and common problem that can harm the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people and it carries significant costs for our community both now and into the future.

The best way to address and prevent bullying is for children, parents and schools to work together in a whole-of-community approach. This study found that most Australian parents have a good understanding about what bullying is, and the serious potential effects on children both in the immediate and longer term. It also found that many parents have a child affected by bullying yet often feel helpless in how to best support them.

One in two parents reported needing more support to empower them to play a role in addressing bullying for their child, whether as a direct victim, a perpetrator or as a bystander. Only a minority of parents felt they could help make a difference to reduce and prevent bullying at their child's school. And only half of parents discussed with their children about how they might deal with someone who was bullying them or someone else.

Cyberbullying is a growing concern among parents. Almost all teenagers and a third of children in mid to late primary school regularly communicate with others online. Parents have an important role to play in guiding their children to have positive online interactions, yet most parents do not regularly talk with their kids about how to do so. Investment is needed to educate parents on how they can support their children to have healthy online relationships.

One in five parents identified their GP as a preferred source of information and support about bullying. Our community increasingly understands that bullying can have serious health effects, and parents are seeking help from the healthcare sector accordingly. GPs and other healthcare providers need to be supported to help families recognise bullying and access the right help at the right time. Parents are frequently distressed when their child is involved in bullying, and the family GP is well-placed to support the whole family in this context.

In order to reduce the burden and cost of bullying in our community, more investment in prevention is needed. Parents clearly want to play a key role in helping to prevent bullying and should be encouraged to support their children to build positive friendships, resilience and relationship skills.

School is the leading source of help for parents in dealing with bullying. These findings suggest that schools could include parents and families more in campaigns to address and prevent bullying. Parents should be encouraged to familiarise themselves with their school's bullying policy and make use of the many resources schools offer to help them support their child.

## Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from April 4 to April 24, 2018, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1854). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. Data presented in this report is from those parents surveyed with one or more children aged between five and less than 18 years (n=1575). The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 75%.

## References

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