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## Covert bullying: A review of national and international research

> " It is the moral responsibility of adults to ensure children's rights are honoured and that healthy development and citizenship are promoted. "
>
> (Kandersteg Declaration, Switzerland, June 10, 2007)[1]

# 2.1 Introduction

The safety of all school members is an essential prerequisite to promote effective schools that enhance the academic, emotional, social development and well being of young people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [2] reinforces the importance of protecting children's quality of life and their rights to be educated in a safe environment, free from all forms of violence, victimisation, harassment and neglect. In line with this basic right, the Australian community has become increasingly aware of the prevalence, seriousness and negative impacts of school bullying – a form of aggression considered to affect the greatest number of students [3]. Research in Australia has indicated that approximately ten percent of school students reported being bullied most days or even every day at school, with almost one half reporting they were bullied at least once during the past term at school [4]. These rates of bullying between students are among the highest in the world [5].

In 1994 the Commonwealth Government of Australia launched a national inquiry into school violence [6] which concluded that school bullying represented a significant national problem and called for the development, implementation and evaluation of programs aimed at reducing school bullying. In response to this inquiry, the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) was endorsed in 2003 by all Australian Ministers of Education, on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) [7]. The NSSF was guided by a vision that Australian schools should provide a safe and supportive environment. In 2004 legislation was passed that required all schools to align their policies with these eleven guiding principles of the NSSF:

1. Affirm the right of all school community members to feel safe at school.
2. Promote care, respect and cooperation, and value diversity.
3. Implement policies, programs and processes to nurture a safe and supportive school environment.
4. Recognise that quality leadership is an essential element that underpins the creation of a safe and supportive school environment.
5. Develop and implement policies and programs through processes that engage the whole school community.
6. Ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all members of the school community in promoting a safe and supportive environment are explicit, clearly understood and disseminated.
7. Recognise the critical importance of pre-service and ongoing professional development in creating a safe and supportive school environment.
8. Have a responsibility to provide opportunities for students to learn through the formal curriculum the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for positive relationships.
9. Focus on policies that are proactive and oriented towards prevention and intervention.
10. Regularly monitor and evaluate their policies and programs so that evidence-based practice supports decisions and improvements.
11. Take action to protect children from all forms of abuse and neglect.

To support schools in the development and implementation of effective programs addressing these guidelines, the Australian Government made available in 2004 $1 million for the implementation of the Best Practice Grants Programme. From this perspective, the NSSF represented a highly innovative, positive approach aimed at addressing growing national concerns regarding both the extent [8-11], as well as the serious deleterious implications [3; 12] of youth aggression and particularly bullying among Australian students. The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) served to heighten awareness of the importance of achieving a shared vision of physical and emotional safety and well-being of all students in Australian schools. In addition it assisted in the identification of guiding principles and strategies to inform practice and assist school communities to build safe and supportive environments. The NSSF was a collaborative effort by the Commonwealth, and State and Territory Governments, as well as non-Government school authorities and other key stakeholders. The shared commitment to the NSSF's goals and policies have been echoed through State Government plans [13]. For instance, the Australian Government and all States and Territories are funding the collaborative initiative known as the Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC). The SSSC project and the associated *Bullying. No way!* website is a nationwide mechanism for sharing information, resources and successful practices to counter bullying, harassment and violence in Australian schools. The NSSF has also fostered a series of whole school programs [14], many of which have shown the potential for significant positive impacts on the overall social and emotional health and well-being of school children [15-19]. Hence, the NSSF fomented Australia's place internationally, alongside some European countries, at the forefront of bullying research. More importantly, Australia was one of the first countries to produce an integrated national policy for the prevention and early intervention of bullying and other aggressive behaviours.

While the concept of school bullying is hardly a new phenomena (with references to it in books like Tom Brown's School Days (1857)), modern research into the topic began with Olweus' pioneering book on Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys (1978). In later studies, Olweus defined bullying [20] as a specific type of aggressive behaviour that is "intended to cause harm, through repeated actions carried out over time, targeted at an individual who is not in a position to defend him/herself". This definition of bullying, as a form of unprovoked, intentional behaviour characterised by a power imbalance, has gained wide acceptance both nationally and internationally [21-25].

Since then, a growing body of research has indicated that both bullying and being bullied can have extensive physical, social and mental health consequences, with a notable impact on academic achievement and social development [11; 20; 26-32]. Young people who are bullied tend to have a dislike of [33] and want to avoid school [34-36], have lower academic competence [37] and have higher absenteeism [37-39]. Students who are bullied are also more likely to have low self-esteem [40-42] and poor assertiveness skills [40] and this can affect their psychological and mental health, and result in academic difficulties due to social exclusion, peer rejection, depression, and negative self-perceptions [11; 26; 28; 29; 43-48]. They are also more likely to have poorer health [11; 49] and more somatic complaints [50-53]; more interpersonal difficulties [38; 54]; higher levels of loneliness [33-35]; suicidal ideation [31]; and increased anxiety [55]. Alternatively, students who bully others are more likely to be aggressive, impulsive, insecure, lack empathy, and have poor personal and social skills [51; 56-58].

While the ramifications of bullying may not be experienced until adolescence or even adulthood, the developmental pathways to such outcomes are in place by early childhood [20; 59-61]. What has become evident is that youth aggression and behavioural maladjustment are not issues that appear suddenly in adolescence [62], but rather are learned or acquired behaviours [63] that follow a trajectory from lower level childhood bullying and aggression, to higher level youth violence [30; 64; 65]. Recent longitudinal data has highlighted the on-going consequences of such anti-social behaviour [25; 59; 66; 67], and have contributed to the theory that bullying is an intra and inter-generational phenomenon, with children who bully others at the age of 14 years likely to still engage in aggression at the age of 32 years and to have children who themselves engage in bullying and aggression [68; 69].

In light of this growing evidence on the harmful long term effects of bullying on young people and on society in general, as well as data on the extent of bullying among Australian students [8-11], it is evident that the National Safe Schools Framework has served as a vital first step in promoting Commonwealth and State investment in preventative whole school programs. Despite their proliferation, the majority of these school based bullying prevention programs in Australia, as elsewhere, have to date tended to focus primarily on direct, face-to-face overt bullying, such as hitting, punching, kicking and teasing which is easier for teachers and parents to detect and therefore understand [8; 17; 70-74].

More recently, however, research and meta-analyses of the outcomes of large-scale interventions to prevent school bullying both within Australia and internationally have shown varied results [75-77], with an important component in successful interventions being related to the degree of commitment and training on the part of teachers [78]. These findings, together with growing media coverage of extreme cases of school violence, youth suicides, and cyber safety infringements, has heightened public awareness and forced policy makers and researchers to re-examine and broaden their definitions of bullying, and to take a closer look at the changing nature of bullying among students today [23; 59; 76; 79].

Within this context, the present study has focused on covert bullying, a less direct form or 'hidden' bullying, that arguably is becoming more prevalent and insidious among students both as a result of the implementation of improved school policies to deal with overt bullying, and with the advent of new forms of information and communication technology (ICT). Covert bullying may take a number of forms such as spreading gossip, hurtful stories or rumours; deliberately excluding or enforcing social isolation; and even bullying using cyber communication technology, an emerging trend which will be discussed in greater detail later. While the general concepts and theories underlying covert bullying, including definitions of indirect, relational, and social aggression, are not new [80-82], research into how to address covert bullying is still in its infancy, due in part to the fact that in the past it has been erroneously perceived as an unpleasant but generally less harmful form of childhood behaviour [83; 84]. Nevertheless, emerging research indicates that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health scars than overt bullying [21; 66; 85-89], that are not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, and also have the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale [90-92].

The recent digital media revolution has provided today's young people with an extra platform and communication culture upon which covert bullying can operate [93-95]. And, while initial research emerging from this study indicates that 'traditional' forms of covert bullying, including gossiping, ignoring, and teasing are still the most prevalent forms of covert bullying in Australian schools, the incidence of cyber bullying is likely to rise in future years. Further, the Australian Labor Government's pledge to invest $1 billion over four years in capital grants to school systems to provide 'world class information and communications technology (ICT) for every secondary student in Years 9 to 12' [96], means that without the 'right' levels of education, support and constraints in place in schools and homes, young people may become even more vulnerable to technology-based harm. Australian schools will also be receiving broadband connections, which will deliver internet speeds around 100 times faster than most current speeds in schools [97]. While this technology will help to maximise the benefits offered by online curriculum content it will also provide an environment that can potentially fester harm to young people through their own or others' misuse of this technology [85; 94; 98-105]. Unless the Government adopts an equally proactive approach to researching, developing and implementing coherent whole of school policies to assist teachers, parents, children and the broader community to address covert bullying, we are likely to see an escalation in this form of aggressive behaviour. From this perspective, the current report represents a first step in understanding and tackling this emerging phenomenon.

# 2.2 Covert bullying as an emerging social phenomenon

The nature of all forms of bullying means that it tends to occur where adult supervision is low or absent. Studies conducted in various countries have found it to be one of the most under-reported of all abuses [79], and although under reporting has generally been viewed as a result of the shame associated with victimisation, Olweus et al. [106] suggests that the inconsequential or inappropriate response of teachers and/or parents was another reason why only a small proportion of young people report bullying.

Policies introduced in most schools across Australia as a result of the National Safe Schools Framework have attempted to change the views and responses of principals and teachers to bullying, from one that in the past treated problems and managed crises, to one based on the promotion of positive social environments and behaviours [58]. To this end, the National Safe Schools Framework incorporates a comprehensive mandate that requires changes to: policy and practice; classroom management and curriculum; school ethos; school, home and community links; student teams; and the physical environment. In practice, however, schools have finite resources and capacity to address bullying. Consequently, they must adopt policies and practices that are most appropriate to their situations. Past national research indicates approximately 50 per cent of reported bullying happens during school break times [4; 107]. The most widely adopted responses by schools have emphasised: improving active supervision by duty staff; increasing their visibility and consistency of response; modifying teacher duty areas to cover 'hot spots' of high bullying prevalence; encouraging understanding of social rights and responsibilities among all bystanders; and using student supporters to encourage bullied students to seek help from a trusted adult.

While these policies and practices have served to reduce the cases of 'visible', physical school yard aggression, evidence is emerging that where they have been implemented in isolation of broader policies aimed at improving the overall behaviour and ethos of the whole school environment, inadvertently, they may have had an isogenic effect, forcing students to find more covert forms of bullying [108]. Borkqvist [109] used the term the 'effect-to-danger ratio' to suggest that in inflicting harm on another person or group of people, individuals look for forms of bullying that will have the greatest effect while minimising their risk of being caught or placed in danger. Similarly, Craig, Pepler and Atlas [110] found that bullying generally reflects the constraints of the situation, with covert bullying being more common in the classroom, whereas overt bullying is more common in the school yard. In a detailed study of the content of anti-bullying policies in the UK, Woods and Wolkes showed a significantly higher incidence of relational bullying, as opposed to overt bullying, in those schools that had detailed and comprehensive anti-bullying policies, compared with schools that had less thorough policies [108]. Interestingly, their study found that despite schools with strong policy scores showing higher incidences of relational bullying, they also

had the fewest children reporting being bullied in the playground, implying that a shift had taken place towards the use of more covert bullying and less noticeable bullying behaviour, as a result of better playground supervision. In line with these findings, Archer and Coyne [111] have surmised that where schools' policies and practices have increased the costs of overt aggression, without simultaneously implementing strategies to increase the costs of indirect forms of bullying, they have unintentionally created fertile grounds for the emergence of covert bullying.

Similarly, Ferrell-Smith [88] points out that many American school harassment policies have focused primarily on curtailing physical and direct aggression, and have placed less emphasis on establishing school-wide policies to address indirect bullying (e.g. rumour spreading, isolation and social seclusion which is more hidden). While this may in part be due to teachers' lack of training and awareness of how to recognise covert forms of bullying [112], a recent study by Bauman and Del Rio [83] also found that teachers have tended to treat covert bullying as a less serious issue and have less empathy for children who are bullied through relational means rather than through overt physical and verbal bullying, and as such are less likely to intervene to prevent it. Equally, other studies noted that teachers were less likely to include relational or covert forms of bullying in their definitions of bullying behaviour [113-115] and considered it to be less problematic [116]. Moreover, in a modified version of the Bullying Attitude Questionnaire [110] aimed at rating primary school teachers' attitudes and reactions to physical bullying, verbal bullying, and social exclusion, Yoon and Kerber [117] found significant differences in teacher reactions across all three bullying types, with teachers showing significantly less empathy towards, and involvement in, dealing with relational aggression.

The importance of school personnel and adults' reactions to covert bullying cannot be emphasised enough. Studies are increasingly indicating that students are less likely to report incidences of covert bullying than overt physical or verbal aggressive behaviour [84; 116; 118], because they felt they could not count on teachers and administrators intervening to stop the bullying, suggesting that instead teachers tended to ignore or dismiss the behaviour [83; 112; 119].

When developing and evaluating comprehensive programs for the prevention of school bullying, like the National Safe Schools Framework, it is imperative that they implement all components of the package [120]. Teachers are essential to intervention efforts [121] and it is crucial to address both their attitudes to different forms of bullying, as well as their awareness of, and confidence in, how to deal with more covert forms of bullying [83]. With the growing data indicating that, for both boys and girls, covert forms of bullying are likely to 'cause the greatest amount of suffering, while they have a greater chance of going unnoticed by teachers' [122], it is clear that the old saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me' is not only inaccurate, but is also dangerous in that it has marginalised the importance of covert bullying in the context of school bullying policy and teacher awareness. As Hazler et al. [116] observed, the mistaken notion that physical and/or overt bullying is more serious than relational bullying needs to be reversed. School anti-bullying programs need to address the issues underlying

the reasons why young people are bullying or being bullied, using whole-school approaches aimed at developing a positive school ethos and culture through teaching pro-social values, such as acceptance of differences and compassion [16; 77; 123; 124]. Unless they do this, they run the risk of simply managing the immediate symptoms of the problem rather than developing long-term solutions. While there is growing agreement that covert bullying needs to be integrated into school policies and practices [78; 83; 116; 117], there has been to date only minimal attention given to the definition and understanding of covert bullying.

# 2.3 Definitions and behaviours linked with covert bullying

There is wide acceptance that bullying involves the systematic abuse of power through unjustified and repeated acts of aggressive behaviour intended to inflict harm [76]. Only recently, however, has there been a recognition that bullying is more than merely a physical or verbal conflict between two personalities, but rather involves a complex social interaction between peer groups [125; 126]. Within this context, covert bullying has been broadly defined as a more subtle, often hidden, form of non-physical, aggressive behaviour aimed at inflicting harm through peer relations, feelings of acceptance, friendships, and self-esteem that can result in social and psychological bruises that are equally, if not more painful than physical ones [111; 127-132].

Researchers have long been interested in peer group relations and aggression. Until the 1980s, both aggression and bullying were viewed primarily as direct, overt physical and verbal attacks, that were conducted in a readily observable manner [76; 133]. Since the 1990s, however, the work of Lapgerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Crick, Underwood and others has broadened the scope of aggression and bullying to include indirect, covert acts that are not readily observable to others. In line with the general definition of the term covert, as something that is secret, disguised, not open or explicit, these forms of aggression and bullying aim to inflict harm on others by spreading rumours, gossiping, excluding members from peer groups, or ignoring them. Subsequently, covert bullying has increasingly been linked with 'indirect', 'relational' and 'social' aggression.

Studies have only recently begun to measure, define and distinguish between the different forms covert bullying may take, as well as the methods of preventing and dealing with them. There is, however, still much disagreement on common terminology [111; 133-136]. Unlike direct aggression and bullying, the intentions and motives of covert bullying and indirect, relational, and social aggression are not always so easy to separate based on their actions [111]. For example, someone may gossip or talk about someone behind their back, without intending to cause harm, or without necessarily understanding or witnessing the serious nature of their consequences [76]. In reviewing the definitions of covert bullying, therefore, it is particularly important to consider the underlying motives and concepts inherent in the theories of indirect, relational and social aggression.

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**Indirect Aggression:** Until the late 1980s, most research on indirect aggression focused on overt physical forms and, in this context, indirect aggressive behaviour involved acts of aggression against impartial objects, such as throwing, slamming, breaking or robbing someone's objects or belongings, and was generally associated with males [133]. In 1988, however, a Finnish team expanded the concept of indirect aggression and drew the distinction between merely physical and verbal face-to-face incidences and aggression occurring behind an individual's back [137]. Subsequently, they conceptualised indirect aggression and/or bullying as a means in which:

> '… the aggressor may remain unidentified, thereby avoiding both counterattack from the target and disapproval from others' [137].

A defining feature of indirect aggression is that the harm is inflicted in a circuitous manner possibly through the use of a third party, and it is described as covert because there is a lack any direct confrontation between the person(s) being bullied and those doing the bullying [138]. As such, a key characteristic of indirect aggressive behaviours involves the cunning 'social manipulation' of the peer group as an instrument to inflict harm on the target person, so that the instigators are neither personally involved in the attack, nor are they identifiable [82; 138; 139]. Examples of indirect aggression include gossiping, making up stories to get someone in trouble, and sending abusive notes to encourage others to exclude them from the group. Equally, examples of physical, indirect aggression include encouraging others to destroy someone's personal belongings or to rob them. The extreme covert nature of these behaviours regardless of their form is nevertheless stressed [140].

**Relational Aggression:** Following on from early research into indirect aggression, Crick and Gropeter [141] introduced the concept of 'relational aggression', which they defined as:

> '... behaviours that harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion' [135]

The emphasis in relational aggression and bullying is not so much on the form in which it takes, but rather on the deliberate intention to damage a person's peer relationships or social standing, and ultimately cause social exclusion [142]. Consequently, relational aggression can be covert or overt. Examples of relational aggression and bullying include playing practical jokes, teasing and embarrassing a person, imitating them behind their backs, breaking secrets, criticising their clothes or personalities, spreading hurtful rumours, sending abusive notes, whispering, and/or maliciously excluding them [32; 128]. While those doing the bullying may silently ignore the person being bullied, equally they may manipulate them by openly stating that they will exclude them from the peer group, unless they do what they want [111]. Thus while there is much overlap between the behaviours linked to indirect and relational aggression, contrary to the view of indirect aggression researchers [143], relational aggression researchers maintain that the concepts and motives underlying the behaviours are distinctly different, and need to be clearly understood in order to develop effective preventative programs [135].

**Social Aggression:** Although the term social aggression was first coined by Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson and Gariepy in 1989 [144], it was Galen and Underwood [130] who further expanded upon the concept of relational aggression, suggesting that it should include non-confrontational attributes that can contribute to ostracising, demeaning and reducing someone's self-esteem and peer group status. Hence, they defined social aggression as a behaviour which is:

> '…directed towards damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take the forms such as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion' [130]

Social aggression encompasses the behaviours of both indirect and relational aggression. Galen and Underwood suggested that, in addition, frequent sly acts involving facial and body expressions (such as eye-rolling, turning one's back on a person, using negative body language and obscene gestures) and/or ignoring them, although more subtle, can over time damage a person's self-esteem, demean them, decrease their peer group status and ultimately cause social isolation [130; 145-147]. Xie, Swift, Cairns and Cairns [148] further expanded on this definition of social aggression, suggesting that it should incorporate only 'actions that cause interpersonal damage and are achieved by non-confrontational and largely concealed methods that employ the social community' (p. 206), and hence involve primarily indirect, covert forms of bullying. Moreover, they sought to distinguish this form of aggression from what they referred to as 'direct relational aggression', involving behaviours that damage a child's friendships and feelings of inclusion. As Archer and Coyne [111] point out, the important notion that Xie et al. highlight in drawing this distinction, is whether the behaviour occurs in a dyad or within a larger social group. If it occurs in a dyad, then the motive of the bullying is merely to control the other person's behaviour, whereas when it occurs within a larger social context, the underlying aim is to manipulate the person's social status or to socially exclude them.

So what do these definitions tell us about covert bullying and how it is manifest among young people today? A common and universal stereotype is that boys are more overtly aggressive, while girls have a tendency to use more indirect covert means [149]. From an evolutionary perspective, the concept of physical aggression has been seen primarily as a male act to assert their physical dominance, and superior size and strength, which occurs where there are few moral restraints or rules of law [111]. For females, however, it has been argued that the costs of direct physical aggression are much higher than for males. On the one hand, it has been suggested that girls tend to be weaker physically so they incur a physical cost [150]. On the other hand it has been suggested that girls are more frequently and consistently punished for direct physical aggression [151]. As such, it argued that they have adopted indirect and relational aggression as alternative strategies [152]. Similarly, studies have suggested that girls typically value close social interaction more than boys [137; 144] and thus, in addition to the social and physical adjustment that girls have made to conform to society's expectations of them as 'nice' [133], there is also

an innate gender issue that makes females more inclined towards more indirect and relational forms of bullying [141]. Early studies of gender differences in indirect and relational aggression confirmed these initial views and found that both forms of aggression occur more frequently in girls than in boys [141; 153; 154].

Nevertheless, recent studies have found that gender differences may not be as substantial as once presumed [140; 155-158]. It has been suggested that social contextual factors play a far more important role than gender in defining how children express and deal with their peer relationships [5; 149] and hence that definitions of indirect and relational aggression and bullying should be viewed from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory [159], considering how children and adolescents view themselves their home-school-community settings [136]. This raises an important question which introduces a new perspective, namely "how do children and adolescents define 'covert' within their different social contexts?" In the definitions of indirect, relational and social aggression outlined above, covert is described as a situation in which the person who is the instigator of the bullying hides behind the group [139] to maximise their effect-to-danger ratio [109]. Within this context, bullying is only truly covert if the person being bullied is unaware of their aggressor. Nevertheless, as a large study of seventh graders illustrated, only in 9% of all cases of indirect and relational bullying were young people totally unaware of those who were involved in bullying them [148]. In other words, in the vast majority of cases (over 90% of the time) the students knew their aggressors' identity. Furthermore, by restricting the definition of covert bullying to include only bullying behaviour that is totally 'disguised' negates the research that demonstrates bullying is not only more likely to occur if bystanders or on lookers are present, but also that the peer group plays a crucial role in actively reinforcing aggression [160-165].

On the contrary, early findings emerging from the current study of children's and adolescents' definitions of covert bullying has highlighted that they have tended to define 'covert', as including any bullying behaviour that is out of sight or 'hidden' from parents, teachers, and other respected groups. From this perspective, most of the behaviours linked to indirect, relational and social aggression, outlined in Table 2.1, could be viewed as covert, as long as the behaviour remains either unwitnessed, or unaddressed, by an adult.

This latter point is significant. Research indicates increasingly that teachers and parents are more likely to intervene in cases of physical rather than relational and social bullying [83; 110; 114; 115; 117; 166]. Consequently, young people will progressively adopt these latter forms of bullying as a means of maximising their effect-to-danger ratio, because they will assume that when school personnel and parents either ignore or dismiss such behaviours, they are either unaware of their bullying and hence that it is hidden [167], or that the behaviour is acceptable or at least tolerated [119]. Either way, those involved in bullying others will view it as a more subtle means of exerting their power, that is more likely to be condoned by adults [112]. Meanwhile, those who are bullied will feel less empowered, and will be less likely to tell a teacher or adult, as they will feel that the adults will be less willing to protect them [83; 112; 118].

Building on this research, that suggests covert bullying involves any form of bullying behaviour that is out of sight of or unacknowledged by adults within the home, school and broader community, we surmise that its key attributes include:

- A power imbalance;
- The repeated manipulation of peer social relations;
- An intention to inflict pain and anguish;
- A lack of empathy and compassion for those being bullied; and
- The ability to go "unnoticed" and for those bullying to enmesh their behaviour in a culture of acceptance.

For the purpose of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS), covert bullying has been broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is 'hidden', out of sight of, or unacknowledged by, adults. Covert bullying includes behaviours linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression, including bullying by means of technology where the bullying behaviour is either unwitnessed, or not addressed, by an adult.

**Table 2.1: Forms of Aggression Related to Covert Bullying**

| Form | Definition | Themes | Linked behaviours |
|---|---|---|---|
| Indirect Aggression | A skilful form of indirect behaviour, which involves manipulating or making use of others to inflict harm, so the person doing the bullying remains unidentified, thereby avoiding counterattack. | • Circuitous harm<br>• Social manipulation of peer group<br>• Use of third party<br>• Peer relationships<br>• Socially sophisticated | • Spreading of rumours<br>• Sending abrasive notes<br>• Encouraging others to exclude a person from the group<br>• Making up stories to get someone in trouble<br>• Encouraging others to pick on, destroy or rob a person |
| Relational Aggression | A more direct (frequently verbal) form of unfriendly covert behaviour aimed at damaging, or threatening to damage, peer relations, friendships, and social standing, as a means of inflicting harm. | • Social exclusion<br>• Manipulation and disruption of relationships<br>• Overt and covert aggression<br>• Peer rejection<br>• Peer victimisation | • Making fun of a person and playing practical jokes on a person<br>• Teasing and embarrassing a person<br>• Imitating/criticising a person behind their backs<br>• Breaking secrets<br>• Criticising a person's clothes and/or personalities<br>• Gossiping and whispering<br>• Maliciously excluding a person<br>• Calling a person names<br>• Throwing things at a person |
| Social Aggression | A more subtle, non-confrontational (generally non-verbal) form of covert behaviour, aimed at intimidating a person and damaging their self-esteem, so as to over time reduce their group status and cause social isolation. | • Non-verbal aggression<br>• Intimidation<br>• Hidden intentions<br>• Minimal retaliation<br>• Disruption to social status<br>• Lowering of self-esteem | • Eye rolling<br>• Turning one's back on a person<br>• Negative body language<br>• Weird or threatening looks<br>• Ignoring or silent treatment<br>• Obscene gestures |

# 2.4 Covert bullying as a developmental, peer group process

Although early research on school bullying described it essentially as a conflict between two personalities [20], in practice, bullying among school aged children almost never happens in isolation [110; 139; 162; 168]. On the contrary, most students know about it and are present when it happens [161; 162]. Thus, they have the option of assisting the person(s) being bullied, actively joining in the bullying, or remaining passive and ignoring it [163; 164]. Given that several studies have indicated that bullying is more likely to occur if bystanders are present, remaining passive does not equate to being neutral, but rather actively reinforces aggression [160; 161]. More subtle and non-confrontational forms of covert bullying are characterised by the power of the peer group to become both a strong vehicle for attack and a critical component in the reinforcement of the behaviour.

The use of the peer group as an instrument of aggression requires specific skills, including an understanding of group mechanisms and leadership skills [139; 169; 170]. Unlike overt physical and verbal bullying, behaviours such as spreading rumours in a manner that damages a person's social standing, making up stories to get someone in trouble, becoming friends with someone to enact revenge against another person, or manipulating a situation to exclude someone from their peer group, requires a high level of social cognition [153; 171-173]. In a study that compared different types of aggression with peer-estimated social intelligence among 10, 12 and 14 year olds, it was demonstrated that while there was no correlation between social intelligence and direct forms of physical and verbal bullying behaviour, there was a strong correlation between social intelligence and indirect aggression among every age group [174].

Further studies have also indicated that developmentally, as children get older there is a tendency for aggression to be expressed increasingly in covert forms rather than in physical acts of violence [153; 155; 175-177]. The impact of such covert aggression is further enhanced by the fact that during middle to late childhood and adolescence peer relationships become increasingly important, and their need to belong to a social group plays a critical role in their social and emotional development [21; 178; 179]. Indeed, researchers have found that, at this age, as young people start developing closer, more intimate relationships and spending more time with their peers [180], the opportunities for indirect and relational bullying increase [176]. Nevertheless, although studies indicate that peer relationships vary among boys and girls at this age, both appear to suffer significant social and emotional distress as a result of relational bullying [176]. Girls tend to be involved in more intimate friendships with a few close peers, whereas boys tend to participate in larger friendship groups [151; 181]. Subsequently, it has been proposed that girls' use of relational bullying is more aimed at inflicting interpersonal harm by manipulating a dyadic situation [182], whereas boys instead focus more on harming the person's membership and status within the larger peer group [183].

A further aspect of using the peer group as a method of bullying is the opportunity for rapid transmission of emotions and behaviours through a crowd, diffusing the level of individual responsibility [184], so that each member feels less responsible for the victimisation, a process referred to as 'social contagion' [185]. This has the added advantage that if the aggressive act is carried out by a single peer, the person bullied may feel that it is just that particular person who does not like him/her, whereas if the entire group engages in the activity, the person being bullied is likely to feel that everyone hates him/her and that this is due to his/her own personal failings [139]. So there is a tendency for people who are bullied to blame themselves and to internalise the problem, making them less likely to retaliate or tell an adult [139].

The question of why other members of the group participate appears to be related to their need to belong and their fear of being excluded [186; 187]. For example, while many students may not agree with bullying [188; 189], most students fail to support the person being bullied [190]. Studies of adolescent cliques suggest that while clique members may not believe the rumours they are told, their main reason for going along with it is for fear of exclusion [191]. As Garandeau and Cillessen [139] suggest, bullying in this way becomes like following a trend, a 'fashionable' thing to do, making them look good and reinforcing their sense of belonging. Contrary to popular belief that the role of groups is to maintain cohesion among individual members, and hence bullying might be a way of excluding those who jeopardise the group's homogeneity, a study of 15 year old girls in Australia [192] found that even when a person who was bullied left the school, and hence no longer posed a threat, malicious rumours were spread to the new school. It has been suggested, therefore, that dysfunctional groups, with a high level of imbalance of power among members, are far more likely to use covert, manipulative forms of bullying [192].

Two implications emerge from these findings with regard to the role of peer group manipulation in covert bullying. The first is that given growing evidence on the developmental trajectory towards greater use of covert and manipulative forms of bullying in line with the improvement of children's language skills [193], and other social-cognitive capabilities [139; 169; 170], it would appear appropriate for preventative programs to place particular emphasis on targeting covert bullying in middle to late primary and early secondary school years. The second implication is that while, to date, such bullying prevention interventions have been aimed at developing concern and empathy among witnesses and the broader school for those who are bullied [189; 194], this may not be enough [139]. Particularly today with new mechanisms, such as cyber bullying, the ability of the person(s) doing the bullying to remain 'invisible' to teachers and parents should not be underestimated. Additionally, it may be necessary to teach students about how group mechanisms work, the motives of bullying, and how they are drawn in to this process, to prevent peers from conforming to the behaviours of those who are initiating the bullying [139]. Such an approach would help students feel more conscious of the pressures exerted on them and would increase their social responsibility [164; 195].

# 2.5 Individual student factors associated with covert bullying

Within the social context of covert bullying as a developmental, peer group process, it has been suggested that those children who are bullied are merely the by-product of group function, either because they are different [196], they have low social status and self-esteem and are easy to target [191], or alternatively because they have high social status and are perceived as a threat [197]. While bullying is widespread and occurs to some extent and in some form in all schools, it does not occur in all peer groups all of the time. The question that emerges is, therefore, "what are the particular social factors and configurations that are likely to contribute to a person being bullied and what impact does each of these factors have on the individuals involved?"

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model [159], it is important to assess the factors affecting the individuals who are bullied and those doing the bullying within their micro, meso, and macro environments, which in this context is influenced by their home-school-community settings [21]. The focus in this section is on the individual factors associated with those who are bullied and those who do the bullying. However, studies have also clearly demonstrated that the actions of peers, teachers and other adults at school, as well as the physical characteristics of school grounds, family factors, cultural factors including race and ethnicity, and even community factors can also serve to reduce or enhance and maintain covert bullying. For school administrators and teachers, it is important to understand the complex interplay between these different variables.

Prior to reviewing the key characteristics of those children who are bullied and those who bully others, an important issue that Garandeau and Cillessen [139] have highlighted is that in each school class there are rarely more than one or two children who are bullied. This has served to reinforce the notion that the person who is being bullied must have done something wrong, or possesses some negative personality traits that encourages the rest of the group to reject them, resulting in lack of empathy on the part of the group towards them and the 'illusion of the single target' [198]. For example, it has commonly been argued that both covert and overt bullying are selectively directed at certain children who tend to be anxious, cautious, sensitive, with low self-esteem [199], or who are considered by the group to have 'unattractive' physical [200-202], behavioural [203; 204], or social-cultural [39] features, such as obesity, physical disability, arrogance, or who belong to a different ethnic group. On the contrary, it has been argued that in the case of relational aggression and covert bullying, the person who is initiating the bullying is likely to feel more protected if there is only one person being bullied. This is because if several members of the class were collectively being attacked they would feel more empathy towards the person being bullied and would be more likely to support them, so it is in their best interest to target only one person [139]. Thus while there may be several potential targets in each group, typically only one is bullied, making it harder to clearly identify characteristics of the persons being bullied, since these will vary depending on the individual

group dynamics and overall environment. From this perspective, instead of attempting to identify key characteristics of those individuals who are bullied, it may be more important to identify the key potential impacts associated specifically with covert bullying and how these manifest in males and females at different ages, so as to identify warning signs and develop preventative and early intervention programs.

Although covert bullying is considered indirect in its action, it is direct in its effectiveness and has been shown to cause considerable distress and psychological harm to both boys and girls [21; 66; 85-89]. Studies have indicated that covert, relational bullying is more strongly related to emotional distress than overt, physical bullying [205] and has been found to be predictive of both current [32; 47; 112; 128] and future [32] social and psychological maladjustment as well as depression in adulthood [26; 128]. Social exclusion has been demonstrated to be the worst form of bullying [92]. In extreme forms it has been linked to suicide [206]. In middle childhood, those who are bullied through indirect covert bullying tend to have higher levels of depression, loneliness, peer rejection and anxiety [30; 32; 128; 207]. Cross-sectional studies of relational aggression and covert bullying have suggested a developmental trajectory towards problematic eating patterns, self-harm, borderline personality disorder and attention deficit problems [135; 208; 209].

Since the early 1990s, a great deal of attention has been attached to gender differences between type, intensity, onset and impact of covert bullying [5; 127; 176; 182]. Most of the early studies concluded that from the age of 11 and continuing through adolescence, girls engaged in covert bullying far more frequently than boys [137; 138; 141; 153]. Moreover, it was argued that because of girls' close knit friendships, in small groups, where they readily exchange intimate details and personal secrets [151; 181], indirect aggression and covert bullying tends to cause far greater emotional distress [141]. By comparison boys tend to socialise in larger groups and share less details [151; 181]. Studies have also suggested that relational aggression and covert bullying are more closely associated with social adjustment problems in girls [208-210]. Longitudinal studies have suggested that girls generally internalise problems and emotions associated with relationally aggressive behaviour [211-213] leading to depression and anxiety, while boys are more likely to externalise problems, resulting in physically aggressive, delinquent and impulsive conduct, which can cause them to bully others [214; 215]. Yet, a more recent study that tracked the relationship between internalising symptoms and relational aggression over time showed no difference between genders [176].

It appears that covert bullying can be equally harmful for both girls and boys, and in both genders is associated with internalising problems in late primary and early secondary school years. While some studies have tended to emphasise the predominance of covert bullying among girls, based on social, physical, and even intellectual grounds, as well its capacity to inflict greater harm on girls, other studies have questioned and indeed demonstrated that boys 'catch up' with girls in early secondary school [155; 216-218] – a process that has been reinforced by the growth in modern information and communication technology [98; 219]. While age seems to be a key factor, with secondary school students using relational aggression and covert forms of bullying more frequently than primary school students [155], few gender differences appear to have been found in the extent to which relational aggression and covert bullying is

used [21; 155]. On the contrary, what these studies have indicated is that while boys tend to use physical bullying and aggression more than girls, they do not necessarily use covert bullying any less frequently than do girls [149]. The major difference between genders is that for girls, holding social knowledge equates to holding social power as a means of manipulating their peers, while boys tend to use 'rational-appearing aggression' [109] to assist them to disguise their manipulation of the situation. Rational-appearing aggression can include interrupting, criticising, unfairly judging others and questioning others' judgement, and is a form of aggression which can be presented as being ostensibly rational and concealed as not being aggressive at all [220]. Both mechanisms have the same ultimate outcome [111]. In other words, both girls and boys rate social aggression and covert bullying as worse than physical aggression and bullying [146; 205], and studies have shown it to be strongly linked to depression [122], anxiety [149] and low self-esteem [221] in both genders.

While gender differences have been the focus of the majority of studies, it may be that gender similarities are equally significant in understanding covert bullying [222]. As Berger [125] points out, most children avoid bullying, thus not only do young people who are bullied encounter social, emotional, academic and health-related problems, equally it has been found that those young people who are involved in bullying tend to have a variety of social, emotional and other problems. On the surface, although indirectly aggressive children may appear to have many positive traits, including being viewed as popular, socially intelligent, and less likely to be lonely [111], Werner and Crick [223] have suggested that the long term use of indirect aggressive behaviour is frequently associated with serious social and psychological difficulties. In the case of women, associations have been drawn with peer rejection, anti-social behaviour, identity problems, self harm behaviour, lower overall life satisfaction, depression, and bulimia [111; 224]. Meanwhile in men, it has been associated with peer rejection, injury, addiction and crime [125].

A number of important implications emerge from the findings of these studies into individual factors contributing to covert bullying. One is the need for schools and parents to be aware of the developmental trajectory of relational aggression and covert bullying. While overt aggression in younger years may not necessarily be a 'gateway' to covert bullying, there does appear to be some correlation between the two [155]. Furthermore, it appears that covert bullying increases in frequency starting in late primary school years among girls [225] and early secondary school years among boys [149], as overt physical aggression decreases [62], and as children renegotiate their dominance in new relationships during school transition years [226]. The second implication is that as both girls and boys in late primary and early secondary school years find covert bullying to be particularly hurtful, this schooling period would appear to be a particularly appropriate time to implement intervention strategies. Current interventions offer some indications of effectiveness, including efforts to train youth regarding appropriate sharing of intimate information and knowledge with friends, as well as more positive ways to use leadership skills among those involved in bullying [225; 227]. Thirdly, there is need for more research and training in the recognition of the different gender related symptoms, both of those being bullied and those involved in covert bullying, to improve parents' and teachers' knowledge, attitudes and abilities to make a difference, so that young people feel they are being heard and can seek and find effective support from adults [225; 227].

# 2.6 The impact of the school on covert bullying

Although some covert bullying, particularly cyber bullying, occurs outside the school environment, and, arguably, is not directly the responsibility of schools, it can later escalate and be played out in the form of more aggressive covert and overt acts during school hours. From this perspective, another important aspect in understanding and ultimately addressing covert bullying is to review the way school personnel and teachers perceive and react to episodes of covert bullying, since they are one of the major 'moral agents', or figureheads, providing daily input into students' moral development [228]. Nevertheless, as mentioned elsewhere in this review, research suggests that many students place little faith in either their teachers' or in other school personnel's empathy with their problems or in their ability to intervene effectively [112; 115-117]. A study of 9-11 year olds in the Netherlands found that, of those children who were bullied, only 53% told their teachers. According to the students who told their teachers they were being bullied, the majority of teachers tried to stop the bullying (88%). Students reported that teachers were successful in their attempts to stop the bullying in only 49% of cases, whereas in 34% of cases their teachers' attempts to stop the bullying made no difference and in 16% of cases the bullying actually got worse [229]. A similar US study with elementary school children found that, particularly among boys, teacher intervention backfired, exacerbating the situation [230]. A study of UK adolescents indicated that students felt they could gain greater support from talking to a peer than to an adult [22]. An Australian study found that almost one half of 14 year olds thought teachers were not empathetic to their needs and thought telling a teacher was not a good idea, and a quarter thought talking to teachers would make matters worse [231]. Recent findings show teachers consider relational aggression and covert bullying to be less serious than overt bullying and are less likely to intervene [83; 117]. This is particularly concerning in light of the emerging trend towards covert bullying [108], as well as the serious present and future impact it has on all involved.

Bauman and Del Rio [83] suggested that teachers' discomfort with ambiguity may be a factor in their lack of intervention in the case of covert bullying. They argued that, with regards to overt, physical and verbal bullying, many schools have clear, standard policies and courses of action for teachers and school personnel to follow. Covert bullying, by its very nature, is difficult to detect and hence is less likely to be outlined clearly in policy guidelines. Thus, if teachers witness a student being continually excluded, they are likely to be unaware of the best course of action to take, and may feel that their intervention will cause further ostracising of the excluded child. Equally, if a rumour has been spread, the damage may already be done. If the harm inflicted by covert bullying actions are not directly observable, and must be inferred as a result of the behaviour of the person who is being bullied, or by the teacher's subjective judgement, the school personnel may feel less confident to intervene. The combination of a lack of clear
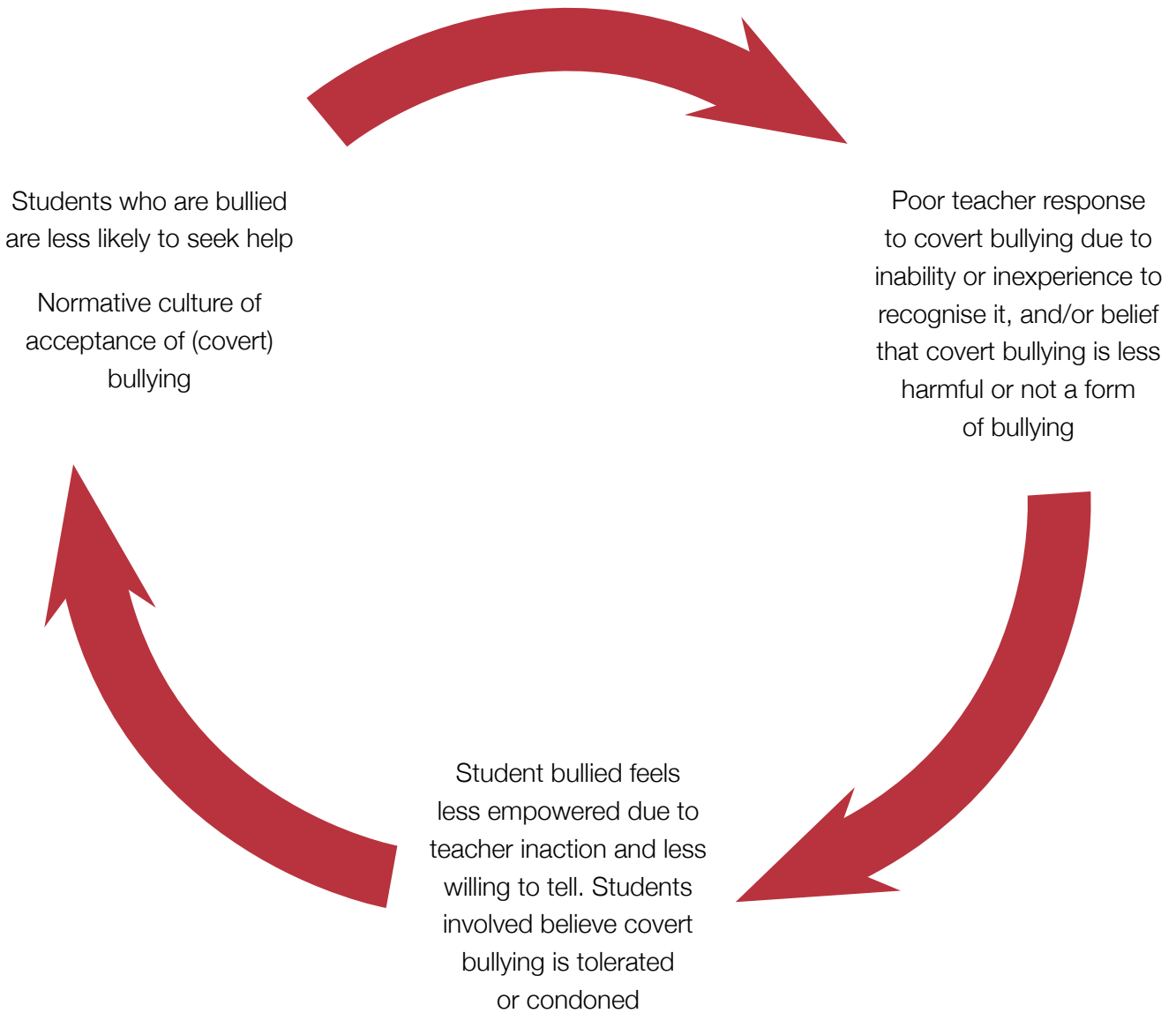
policies and information on appropriate action, and insecurity on the part of teachers who are continually under scrutiny, is likely to be a major barrier to the success of anti-covert bullying programs [120].

Similarly, there is a general perception that covert bullying and relational aggression is normative behaviour among adolescents [120; 232]. This has contributed to reluctance by teachers to respond [192]. Just as it has been argued that some children are more likely to be the target of bullying because they are in some way different from their peer group, it has also been suggested that teachers may find some children less appealing and may resist intervening. As Elias and Zins [233] noted, adolescents who are involved in covert, relational bullying often hold high status not only with their peers but also with their teachers, as they are often good at sports, better looking, with strong social and leadership skills. While most students have at some time been involved in bullying and/or been bullied, bullying is not a personality trait but a response to circumstances [234]. Students with a good understanding of social situations, but who lack empathy, will find that covert bullying works well in schools that do not take a stance to confront it. Before implementing effective school-based programs aimed at preventing covert bullying, it is therefore essential to first look at how teachers are currently intervening and the impact this is having.

As the Bauman and Del Rio [83] study found, teachers' responses illustrated a basic misunderstanding of the nature of covert bullying. Comments were noted such as telling the child "not to be sad" or trying to boost the child's self esteem by giving them some form of reward. This not only negates the fact that adult attention cannot compensate for peer rejection at a time in young people's development when being part of a peer group is essential, it can also promote jealousy and lead to further retaliation on the part of peers. Similarly, teachers' efforts to console and minimise a bullying incidence with comments like, "I don't think he really meant what he said", or to rationalise the bullying behaviour by saying, "I wonder why she said such a thing, maybe she is feeling grumpy or upset today", while well intentioned, not only excuses the behaviour, but also reinforces the notion that the person being bullied cannot expect support from their teacher. Also, comments like, "don't worry, there are plenty of other people to be friends with" shows a lack of understanding of the feelings of the person who is being bullied, and the degree to which they may be socially isolated. This cycle of inaction to address covert bullying is shown in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1: Cycle of inaction to address covert bullying**



Students who are bullied are less likely to seek help

Normative culture of acceptance of (covert) bullying

Poor teacher response to covert bullying due to inability or inexperience to recognise it, and/or belief that covert bullying is less harmful or not a form of bullying

Student bullied feels less empowered due to teacher inaction and less willing to tell. Students involved believe covert bullying is tolerated or condoned

Thus, to be effective, school bullying prevention programs need to include policies and actions for dealing with covert as well overt bullying [83; 120]. As teachers are integral to the successful implementation of this process, it is essential that both pre-service and in-service teachers' training includes a review of their attitudes towards bullying and how those attitudes relate to their in-classroom and school yard responses to students [235]. At the same time, training should provide them with the confidence and skills to recognise and deal with covert bullying [83]. Pre-service training programs provide an ideal setting for enhancing these skills [78], however it is also argued that such training be extended to in-service school personnel, including pastoral care staff, and others such as school bus drivers.

Nevertheless, due to its covert nature, it is unreasonable to expect teachers and school personnel to recognise and respond appropriately to all bullying episodes. As children mature they develop strategies to conceal bullying, so while it is essential for teachers to be receptive and aware of the underlying issues, there are also a number of whole school and systemic strategies that can be implemented to reduce bullying. At one level, school climate and ethos are important factors that can affect students' attitudes to bullying and aggression, and the personalities of their role models. If school staff and older peers accept and condone relational aggression, it is plausible that covert bullying will flourish [21]. While several studies have analysed school climate and its impact on student behaviour, few have specifically looked at its impact on bullying, and more specifically covert bullying. Nevertheless, some studies do demonstrate that schools which have stronger pro-social attitudes, and strong parental involvement, generally do have lower levels of bullying [21].

Equally, it has been argued that physical structures can play a role in reducing indirect, covert bullying in the classroom and playground. In the past, it has been suggested that the majority of overt, physical and verbal bullying occurs in school yards and non-classroom areas of the school, because of the unstructured nature of activities and limitations for supervision, while in the classroom children resort to indirect covert types of bullying to avoid detection [110]. Yet if we are to take children's definition of covert bullying as anything that is 'hidden' from, or 'out of sight' of, adults then, there are a number of means of reducing covert bullying in both the classroom and school yard through the adaptation of contextual features, such as: the allocation of areas for structured activities that are more open and visible; the provision of several smaller, defined spaces that can help to limit power control of preferred spots by certain groups to the exclusion of others; and the placing of teachers at the back of classroom, or in a position where they are continually moving between students so they can be more alert to covert mobile phone text messaging, indirect body language and the like. Additional strategies may include provision of safer areas where the child to teacher ratio is higher, and the wearing of brightly coloured vests by teachers to increase students' visibility of on-duty teachers in the school yard.

Another issue of interest related to the school context and levels of bullying is whether bullying is more common in single sex or co-education schools [236; 237]. There are suggestions that in front of a male audience, girls may feel more inclined to mask their feelings. By contrast, in front of girls, boys may receive reinforcement for assertiveness, even if not physical [134]. Two Australian studies [236; 237] have shown that girls in co-education schools are subjected to more indirect, verbal and physical bullying than those in single sex schools. The study by Delfabbro et al. also showed that boys in Government co-education schools are significantly more likely to be bullied than boys in private, single sex schools, and that they are also more likely to bully and intimidate girls in co-education schools [236]. These findings have reinforced previous work by Watson [238] that suggests all girls' schools strengthen female norms which oppose overt displays of aggression. As James and Owens [237] indicate, indirect and verbal bullying are more frequent in all girls' schools because the environment encourages them to comply with feminine social etiquette, while the close intimate relationships offer them an ideal opportunity to mask their aggressive intentions.

Another key issue highlighted through James' and Owens' [237] study was the use by adolescent girls' of conflict management, peer support, compromise and avoidance in the resolution of indirect and covert bullying, as opposed to resorting to overt angry responses, which were more prevalent in co-education schools. This reinforces the notion made previously, relating to the benefits of teaching students about group mechanisms [139], as well as strengthening their skills in conflict resolution [239].

# 2.7 Family and community factors associated with covert bullying

While a number of anti-bullying projects have focused on the school, the influence of family and community factors can also play a major role in how relational aggression and covert bullying are manifested. Emerging research suggests the influence of family relationships on covert bullying is similar to their influence on physical aggression and overt bullying [47; 129; 136]. Studies increasingly demonstrate a link between the role of the family and social context in the development and/or prevention of bullying among children [9; 56; 160; 240]. Significantly, Stephenson and Smith [202] found that children involved in bullying are three times more likely to have family or parental problems. Several recent studies have focused on the role of parenting styles in either implicitly or explicitly causing child behavioural problems, highlighting how poor parental supervision [241], harsh physical punishment and threats [184; 240], erratic and inconsistent discipline [9], disharmony between parents [57; 242] and authoritarian parenting [242] can contribute to a higher risk of children bullying others. Similarly, parental absence, lack of communication, or a cold or unsupportive attitude on the part of parents towards children has been found to be associated with increased bullying by male students, and higher rates of victimisation among female students [9]. Yet, there appears to be no evidence to suggest that lower levels of involvement by fathers are more significant in the bullying behaviour of sons than of daughters [243]. Alternatively, over-protective and/or over-involved parents may increase the risk of the child being bullied [242].

A number of theories have been used to explain relationships with the family and why children engage in bullying [244]. The first is based on the Social Cognitive Theory [245] and suggests that children learn or acquire aggressive behaviours through observation and imitation of parents. A second school of thought, based on the Theory of Symbolic Interaction [244], proposes that a child's self-concept is greatly influenced by how others (and particularly their parents) see them. Results of Christie-Mizell's study found that self-concept is one of the most powerful predictors of bullying behaviour among primary and middle school children [244]. The study found that at this age children appear to internalise poor parental communication and damaging home and family environments, which in turn directly and indirectly lowers their self-concept and increases bullying behaviour. Earlier studies, however, have suggested that a child's 'perception' of the level of power and cohesion within their family may be more important in influencing their behaviour, than the 'actual' nature of relations within their family [242].

Regardless of the underlying causes, research generally concurs that family relations play an important role in bullying behaviour. There are findings that authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) parents who provide children with good supervision and who set boundaries, while at the same time granting their children a level of psychological autonomy, enhance the development of protective social skills among their children, and strengthen their capacity to find creative rather than reactive solutions when resolving conflicts [241]. Subsequently, many studies have proposed that school based anti-bullying interventions should have a significant parent and family component to ensure that family members play an active and supportive role in school programs, and promote protective factors against bullying in their children [246; 247]. Studies have also found that children are more likely to talk to their parents than to teachers about being bullied, yet many parents of children who are bullied did not always know how best to talk to their children about the issue, and hence require appropriate information and support to deal with the incidence of bullying [229].

Extra-familiar and community factors may also increase the probability of children adopting covert bullying and relationally aggressive forms of behaviour [136]. Numerous studies have shown that physical violence in the media can influence subsequent aggression and desensitisation of youth [248-250]. Nevertheless, only recently have studies started to analyse the impact of indirect aggression and covert bullying in the media and its effects on children's behaviour [251; 252]. In their study, Coyne and Archer [251] found that 92% of all popular adolescent programs aired on British television contained indirect aggression, and they found a relationship between the amount of televised indirect aggression girls viewed and the amounts of indirect aggression they displayed.

Teachers, parents, peers and the media can all influence and shape the social network in which children grow up and provide them with cues on what is acceptable behaviour. As with overt bullying there is a need to raise parents', peer and other community members' awareness of short and long term problems related to covert bullying. This includes providing them with information on forms and modes it takes; how to recognise signs of covert bullying and provide a supportive, caring environment; how to employ positive conflict resolution techniques; and how to assess their own role modelling behaviour. Methods used to achieve these have included: parental awareness-raising through, for example, newsletters on school policy; parental education sessions on the subject of covert bullying; and one-on-one discussions with parents of children who have been bullied or are involved in bullying.

Notwithstanding these findings, a recent systematic review of anti-bullying interventions revealed mixed results [77]. The review grouped studies according to curriculum only interventions, targeted interventions (aimed solely at providing social skills training to children who had been bullied or who were involved in bullying others), and multi-disciplinary, whole-school interventions, many of which included parent components. The findings demonstrated that both curriculum only and targeted interventions seldom improved any form of bullying. By contrast, those interventions that sought to alter the schools' environments, through individual, teacher, peer group and parent components were more likely to have significant positive outcomes [77]. These findings add to the theory that bullying, in either overt or covert forms, is a socio-cultural phenomenon [124] involving individuals, peers, school personnel and parents, as well as home, school and community environments, and as such any effort to address it must involve all these aspects.

# 2.8 The growth of information and communication technologies and their impact on covert bullying

One important issue that has not been discussed so far in this review is the effect of the significant growth in information and communication technologies (ICT) on covert bullying. School students today have access to a highly connected world through the internet and they are frequent and sophisticated users of many information and communication technologies including computers and mobile phones. At one end of the spectrum, technology has become the 'pen and paper' of our time, and knowledge of how to use digital and connected technology is offering young people a greatly expanded means to broaden their education and develop innovative ways to analyse, synthesise, and create new knowledge, while at the same time enhancing their peer relationships [253; 254]. At the other end of the spectrum, the anonymous virtual nature of the technology, the lack of central control, and limitations for monitoring and supervising its use, has enabled adolescents to adopt a new and pervasive form of covert aggression [85; 94; 98-105], referred to as 'cyber bullying' [99], in which the location, actors, language and gestures of face-to-face bullying have evolved and moved into the virtual world [255].

While the internet is a powerful tool with many positive attributes for education, the Australian media have recently highlighted the negative side of the internet, with stories about suicide, Columbine-style threats and concerns about harassment and bullying [256-258]. Safety on-line is a growing concern for young people, and within this context schools, which have a legal duty of care toward their students, need to understand the attitudes and behaviour used by students in this virtual environment [259]. Today schools use technology to deliver curriculum, assign homework and develop extra-curricular activities. As such, it is increasingly important that educational policy makers, school administrators, teachers, parents and youth become attuned to both the positive and negative interactions related to the current virtual revolution [260].

'Cyber bullying' has been described as a particularly damaging form of psychological covert aggression that involves "….the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others…" [99], and frequently involves "[s]ending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies" [261, p. 1]. Early studies indicate that Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging using mobile phones is the most common medium used for cyber bullying among adolescents in Australia [262]. Students can create personal on-line profiles (known as Xangas) where they might list classmates they do not like, or similarly they may take on anonymous, virtual personalities in Multi-User Domain (MUD) online game rooms to harass others. Alternatively, cyber bullying can take the form of enticing individuals to share secrets or photographs (emailed in confidence), that are then altered and sent to unlimited audiences once relationships sour [101].

Consequently, with the advent of new technology, covert bullying is being transformed from 'behind the scene to behind the screen'. Verbal aggression and bullying translates easily to SMS mobile phone text messaging, e-mailing, instant messaging, and use of chat-rooms: indeed, to anywhere in which virtual text is used to communicate. In this way, the use of ICT can enable young people to inflict social isolation, exclusion, and manipulation on a much broader scale, with a significantly higher effect–to-danger ratio [263; 264]. For instance, mobile phone technology now makes it extremely easy to photograph a person (such as a child in a changing room) and instantly disseminate the image via e-mail or other means within a matter of seconds to a much wider audience than merely close friends within the school or neighbourhood [85; 87]. Only physical aggression is left out of cyber bullying, however its virtual equivalents (from open threats to virtual rape) have the potential to leave lasting psychological scars [90; 91].

Cyber bullying may be rooted in the same problem as other forms of covert bullying, with some researchers questioning whether it is an 'old problem in new guise' [94; 265], yet there are ways that this technology can be used which raise a very different set of issues for schools and parents to deal with. Traditionally, educational institutions have played a pivotal role in producing a positive influence on societal progress. This is achieved by providing in young people the academic capacity to address emerging challenges, while at the same time nurturing in them pastoral care social values to become civic minded individuals [266]. While pedagogical and legal policies, like the National Safe Schools Framework, have assisted in creating positive, supportive environments for the reduction of face-to-face bullying that occurs on school grounds, the virtual nature of cyber bullying means it may occur both within the school environment or off-campus, blurring the boundaries for supervision and responsibility, and introducing a number of unprecedented legal and educational concerns for schools [103; 255; 259; 267]. For example, questions have been raised about the extent to which schools can be expected to intervene when cyber bullying occurs off-campus, outside of school hours, and/or from home computers [103; 268] and current legal boundaries regarding freedom of expression, student privacy, and protection of cyberspace remain unsolved [102-104]. The nebulous nature of cyber bullying, together with the lack of clarity regarding legal boundaries has, until recently, led to school administrators and teachers putting up a 'wall of defence' absolving them from doing anything to protect those who are bullied through such means [269].

Despite the past 'hands off' approach adopted by schools, increasing numbers of students are today using school internet systems either during school hours, or after school activities, or even from their homes, as a means of cyber bullying. In other cases, students' personal digital devices, such as: mobile phones, digital cameras, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and personal computers are used in school grounds to engage in bullying [270]. Studies have also indicated that covert aggression initiated off-campus through malicious SMS mobile phone text messaging, instant messaging and other digital means can later be played out in the form of overt and/or covert bullying at school [271; 272]. In response to the potential risk of litigation cases against schools and education departments, recently there has been a growing recognition on the part of principals to develop new policies to address the issue and to provide students with a cyber safe environment [273]. However, 'knee jerk' responses have been made by some schools to enforce blanket zero-tolerance policies regarding technology. While well-intentioned, these have ignored the root problem and overlooked the systemic and generational barriers, serving only to further marginalise those children most in need of support, while perpetuating the cycle of bullying and cyber bullying [98]. Similarly, efforts by parents to restrict their children's use of technology or to set online filters have had limited outcomes, and in some cases may have exacerbated the problem [274]. While such approaches have been justified by the desire to enhance student safety and remove distractions from learning, in practice, they have tended to blame 'technology' for behaviour that is rooted in wider social problems and in the psychological issues that characterise adolescence.

Rather than restricting access to new technology, perhaps schools should be developing holistic methods that build on the substantial positive benefits that can be brought about through the ICT revolution, by enhancing collaborative learning experiences and social interaction using these mechanisms in the classroom [275]. Like efforts to deal with other forms of covert bullying, this would include the introduction of school policies that: foster inclusive and positive codes of conduct with respect to the use of digital technology; assist youth to define acceptable boundaries for student relations in cyberspace; and encourage young people to develop moral and behavioural values that reduce cyber bullying and enhance cyber safety [103; 259; 260; 276]. The development of such policies, however, is dependent on a sound understanding of: how cyber bullying differs from other forms of overt and covert bullying; the barriers and misconceptions that have enabled cyber bullying to flourish; the importance of the virtual environment in the development of social networks for young people; and the developmental psychology of adolescence and how virtual communications affect the way in which youth today construct their personal identities, attitudes, and values.

Early research indicates that Australia is a global leader in SMS mobile phone text messaging, with mobile phones being the most common medium used for cyber bullying among adolescents in Australia [262]. A study conducted by the Australian Psychological Society in 2004, indicated that 83% of Year 7 to 12 students had a mobile phone, with 61% using their phone at least once per day [277]. Data also indicates that SMS mobile phone text messaging has increased exponentially with about 500 million SMS messages being sent each month in 2004, as opposed to only 10 million in 2000 [278]. Today

the figure is likely to be significantly higher. Equally, the use of internet is increasing. In 2006, 64% of Australian households had home internet access [279], while our current survey has shown that in 2008 this figure is closer to 90%. As access to ICT increases, it is predicted the incidence of cyber bullying will also rise, with a Brisbane study reporting that over one half of the students questioned felt that cyber bullying was growing [262].

International research has demonstrated that both male and female adolescents are increasingly using digital technology in covert bullying [22; 219; 235; 280; 281] as a means of enhancing the effect-to-danger ratio [85; 91; 95]. Nevertheless early research in this area tends to concur that girls use cyber bullying as a means to exert relational aggression to demean and exclude others from their peer groups through verbal gossip and threatening [282; 283], while boys are more likely to use it to impose sexual harassment [98], through the use of confrontational language in homophobic bullying of male peers and increased sexual harassment of females [274; 283]. This latter form of gender-based cyber bullying can take the form of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, cyber stalking, and sexual coercion [284]. To achieve these outcomes, the young aggressor(s) hide behind the anonymity of fictitious screen names, or 'avatars' which they alter regularly [267], creating a lack of inhibition, referred to as 'disinhibition' [285]. Willard [286] identified a number of characteristics of the virtual world that have facilitated disinhibition, one being the illusion of invisibility, while the second is the lack of visual and aural contact with the individuals being bullied. This means that participants and on-lookers rarely witness the pain inflicted and are less likely to feel sympathy or compassion for the person being bullied, with adolescents justifying the use of cyber bullying for fun [85].

Evidence also suggests that young people who bully others using digital technology can be motivated to continually apply more severe methods of intimidation, starting with SMS mobile phone text messaging, followed by chat rooms, and then e-mail [95; 267; 287], leading aggressors into a developmental pathway of anti-social behaviour in technology use [95; 263; 264; 267; 272; 273; 287]. Research also indicates that students who are bullied by others in the schoolyard and other 'real' environments often feel more comfortable communicating online, and are significantly more likely (51%) to engage in cyber bullying as a means of retaliating against serious conventional bullying [91]. Therefore, it is recommended that educators, parents and policy makers need to be careful in their handling of cyber bullying, so as not to further alienate young people who are victimised by conventional bullying behaviour [261]. In their extensive study, Ybarra and Mitchell [288] revealed that adolescents who are lonely, socially isolated, who have high levels of conflict with their parents, and/or misuse legal or illegal drugs are more likely to engage in on-line harassment behaviour. While similarly, Wolak, Mitchell and Finklhor [289] found that young people with poor parent relationships, delinquency, low self-esteem, and psychosocial challenges are likely to seek more online behaviour increasing their vulnerability to online exploitation.

To date information on the incidence of cyber bullying is limited, with national and international research studies focusing on small and localised populations of young people. For example, a survey of 120 Year 8 students in Australia indicated that over one quarter knew someone who had been bullied using mobile phones, while a further 11% admitted they had cyber bullied and 14% revealed they were targets of bullying [287]. Similarly, a US study of 1500 adolescents indicated one in three young people studied had been cyber bullied, while a further 16.7% of those surveyed identified themselves as someone who cyber bullies others, with over half of those surveyed justifying using cyber bullying for fun [85]. A UK study revealed that one in four young people aged 11 to 19 years reported being bullied via the internet or mobile phone [95]; and a further UK study of 92 participants [290] found that cyber bullying was becoming increasingly prevalent, with phone, text messages, and email the most common forms. A recent survey from Alberta, Canada, disclosed that 23% of middle school students were bullied by e-mail, 35% in chat rooms, and 41% by mobile phone [265]. Of these Canadian students, 32% were bullied by known school mates, 11% were bullied by people outside their school, and 16% were bullied via multiple sources [265]. A study of electronic bullying in rural Ontario [291], highlighted the distinct form which cyber bullying takes and its differences from traditional playground bullying, indicating that as many females as males participate, whether by bullying others, being bullied, or as on-lookers. The study also suggested that this form of bullying could have a greater impact on those being bullied due to the intrusiveness of the bullying outside of school hours and the potential widespread dissemination of some forms of electronic bullying.

Likewise, a survey of 2,027 eleven and twelve year olds attending Western Australian Catholic schools found that almost 10% had been sent hurtful messages on the internet during the past school term, with the figure being as high as 12.5% among girls [292]. Similar data from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre's (CHPRC) Survey Service (collected from secondary schools across Australia in 2005 and 2006) indicates that 13% of the 1286 students participating in the survey had received hurtful messages using SMS mobile phone text messaging, while 15% had received hurtful messages through the internet. Nevertheless, figures emerging from the current national study of covert bullying, suggest average levels of cyber bullying across Australia are approximately 7-10%, which is still significantly below that of other developed nations. This provides the opportunity to take positive preventative action in Australia before the problem escalates.

Despite young people's increasing access to technology and the growing public concern for solutions to this pervasive problem there has been slow progress to date in the development of effective preventative initiatives to address cyber bullying. Contributing factors are: the current legal policy vacuum [259], schools' restrictive approaches; and teachers' and parents' general lack of knowledge and understanding of how adolescents use digital technology to communicate and form social networks. Research on how best to intervene to prevent and reduce the impact of technology in relational aggression is virtually absent. Generational differences and lack of parental connectedness have, in part, been blamed for the dearth of evidence-based interventions, with 'teachers and parents still viewing digital technology as a practical tool, while Australian adolescents increasingly see it as an essential part of their social life and interaction

with peers' [267; 293]. As a Brisbane study showed, many Year 8 students believe that adults have no knowledge that they have on-line lives [287], while other studies indicated that almost half of students who were bullied using technology told nobody, for fear of having their computers or mobile phones taken away from them, creating further isolation [85; 95].

A significant issue faced by schools, parents and other care-givers is to understand the perceptions young people have of their on-line activities, as well as the risks inherent in such activities. This is particularly relevant as the generation who currently make policy decisions has had (for the most part) no experience of the internet themselves as children and adolescents. This is an issue compounded by the speed of technological change and the corresponding shifts in the culture and activity of young people. As such, the 'always on' youth culture is a new phenomenon that does not always match the perception of adults. Most parents are challenged to deal effectively with these problems at home. While parents, teachers and students clearly need to be made aware of the consequences of severe and continuous bullying very few evidence-based resources are available to help them. Most of the currently available resources address cyber safety issues without specifically addressing bullying [85]. However a key initiative of the Australian Government's cyber-safety plan is the newly established Consultative Working Group on Cyber Safety. The Group will examine aspects of cyber-safety that Australian children face, such as cyber bullying, identity theft and exposure to illegal and inappropriate content. The Consultative Working Group will consider the reports of its Sub-Committees and a Youth Advisory Group on cyber-safety issues for children and how to deliver effective solutions.

# 2.9 Early interventions to reduce covert bullying

While today there is growing acknowledgement of the seriousness of both overt and covert bullying, until recently covert bullying has been associated primarily with indirect aggression (such as rumour mongering and social isolation) and has been thought to be less serious. As something that is difficult to identify and discourage, this literature review has found no published data on successful evidence-based early interventions aimed specifically at preventing covert bullying among school aged children. On the contrary, even in those interventions that have adopted a broader definition of bullying, the focus of their efforts and anti-bullying materials appears to emphasise the more obvious physical and direct forms of bullying [76].

Despite this lack of hard evidence, as educational departments, school administrators, teachers, parents and researchers invest increasing amounts of time and money into school based anti-bullying interventions, there is a need to review past efforts to reduce both bullying prevention and indirect/relational aggression, in an effort to assess 'promising' interventions. In a recent systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying, Vreeman and Carroll [77] highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of 26 school-based interventions that included randomised control trials. In line with the findings of Smith [76], the review drew attention to the varying success rates of different projects, suggesting that while there is no magic solution, the extent to which schools take ownership of the problem, the holistic way in which they apply their efforts, and the sustained application of their policy and related activities over the longer term may be a key factor in the degree of success. More specifically the review notes that curriculum only interventions, based on promoting anti-bullying attitudes within the classroom, while economically attractive, have had limited success in decreasing bullying. This is also the case for targeted interventions aimed at strengthening the social and behavioural skills of those children who are bullied and those who bully others [77]. The most 'promising ' interventions appear to be those that take a more whole school approach, yet even among these there have been considerable variations in outcomes [77; 124].

Table 2.2 was developed by Smith et al. [124]. It highlights that whole school approaches entail a variety of components aimed at enacting changes at all of the various school, classroom, home-community, peer, and individual levels. All too often, schools have failed to implement these interventions in a systematic way, with few interventions incorporating all components of the whole school approach outlined in the table.

## Table 2.2: Components of Current School-Based, Anti Bullying/Aggression Interventions

| Domains | | Program Components |
|---------|---|---|
| School | Policy | • Development of an anti-bullying policy and plan of action by the School Board;<br>• Setting up of an anti-bullying committee;<br>• Development of a common definition of bullying and how to deal with reports and observations of bullying behaviour; and<br>• Demonstrated commitment by senior staff to school anti-bullying policy. |
| | Information & training | • Identification of skills required by staff, parents and students to implement the school's anti-bully policy; and<br>• Development of staff training programs, curriculum activities and educational materials. |
| | Supervision | • Increased supervision by duty staff outside the classroom, particularly during break times; and<br>• Provision of more structured activities with adherence to social rules. |
| | School yard reorganisation | • Identification and modification of bullying 'hot spots'; and<br>• Provision of stimulating playgrounds with wider variety of activities and greater visibility to duty staff. |
| | Ethos | • Provision of a positive school environment that provides safety and support for students and promotes their well being; and<br>• Awareness raising of students' rights and the provision of counselling/ support structures. |
| Classroom | Rules | • Introduction of rules and sanctions. |
| | Curricular activities | • Development of appropriate curriculum to promote students' personal development;<br>• Development of curriculum activities that foster positive relations among students;<br>• Encouragement and recognition of positive student behaviour; and<br>• Use of cooperative learning methods to encourage empathy, pro-social behaviour and respect for others. |
| | Social skills training | • Provision of teachers with professional development opportunities. |

| Domains | | Program Components |
|---|---|---|
| Parent | Information | • Development of educational materials and use of different communication channels to raise awareness of bullying signs and symptoms and appropriate means of follow-up; and<br>• Provision of opportunities for skill building among parents and the community. |
| | School-home-community links | • Establishment of close cooperation between staff and parents;<br>• Encouragement of parents and the wider community to present a consistent message about bullying across the home, school and community; and<br>• Development of positive strategies to deal with bullying in collaboration with parents. |
| | Targeted efforts | • Contact parents of children involved in bullying if appropriate; and<br>• Seek assistance of community professionals especially for families who may require more intensive support. |
| Peer | Student support teams | • Use of student services' teams, school health/pastoral care services, and outside agencies to help reduce bullying; and<br>• Use of group oriented, peer support programs. |
| Individual | Targeted efforts | • Interventions to improve the social and behavioural skills of children who are bullied and/or who bully others. |

Smith et al. [124]

A further complication with most interventions is that they have paid little attention to covert bullying and hence all the policies, practices, educational resources and support structures aimed at schools, teachers, parents, and young people have emphasised the more obvious physical and direct verbal forms, as opposed to providing them with comprehensive skills to deal with all forms of bullying, including indirect and relational bullying [83; 115]. Yet, while indirect and relational bullying appear to be more strongly related to emotional distress than is physical bullying [112; 294], teachers and schools still tend to ignore or dismiss such behaviours [84; 119]. Nevertheless, with the growth in recent years of covert bullying, and more specifically cyber bullying, there may be a need for school administrators and educational departments to review policies, action plans, and training programs to raise awareness of the means through which the social-cognitive skills of some aggressive children are being used to 'invisibly' manipulate a whole group against one child [139]. In particular, school boards need to re-assess their policies in light of changes in the way schools currently use ICT in curriculum and the panacea this opens up for new forms of covert bullying [268]. Since teachers are integral to effective whole school policies, it is crucial that new in-service and pre-service training be developed to increase their awareness of, and capacity to deal with, covert bullying [78; 83]. In particular, they need to learn to use new technology in a manner that is intellectually stimulating to young people, presenting, for example, ambiguous scenarios based on adolescents' experiences, to encourage them to discuss and reflect on possible outcomes, interpretations, and solutions, to provide a range of novel and safe, on-line learning environments [295]. The desired outcome of such an educational program would be to provide young people with an understanding of group behaviour and group change, and to build their knowledge of how to engage in low levels of identity deception and protect their public image. It appears that while systematically implemented whole school interventions still offer much potential, they need to be directed towards covert as well as overt bullying, and incorporate policies and education training programs that take into account our rapidly emerging virtual world.

# 2.10 Summary of findings

## Prevalence of covert bullying

- Covert bullying appears to be one of the most under-reported of all abuses, perhaps due to the shame associated with the bullying or as a consequence of no or inappropriate responses provided by parents or teachers. Teachers and parents are more likely to intervene on physical ('overt') types of bullying behaviour than relational and social bullying. As a result, students may be encouraged to engage in covert bullying to reduce the likelihood of being detected or reprimanded.

## Covert bullying and age of students

- As students get older there is an increasing tendency to bully using covert behaviours rather than overt behaviours.

## Factors associated with covert bullying

- Students with a good understanding of social situations, but who lack empathy, find covert bullying works well in schools that do not take action to address it. Using the peer group as an instrument of aggression requires skills and understanding of group mechanisms and leadership skills. Covert bullying requires a high level of everyday social cognition and social intelligence. No correlation has been found between overt behaviours and social intelligence.

## Effects of covert bullying

- Covert bullying presents a higher effect-to-danger ratio, such that it contributes to the greatest harm, or effect, largely through social isolation, to the student being bullied, whilst minimising the risk that the student who is bullying will be caught, put in danger or reported for bullying.

## Responding to covert bullying

- School policies that increase the consequences of overt bullying without increasing the consequences of covert bullying unintentionally create fertile ground for the emergence of covert bullying.

## Staff attitudes to covert bullying

- Teachers who lack training to help them understand covert bullying are less able to recognise it, often consider it less serious or problematic, and have less empathy for children who are covertly bullied and are less likely to intervene to prevent it. As a result students don't tell them how they are feeling or talk about incidents of covert bullying because they feel it doesn't count.

- Covert bullying seems to have the greatest amount of suffering with the greatest chance of its occurrence going unnoticed. Hence young people perceive that it is condoned by adults.

## Strategies to reduce covert bullying in schools

- The literature review suggests that the most promising interventions appear to be those that take a more whole-school approach, although their success has varied. Effective school policies to prevent and deal with covert bullying will require the development of programs aimed at:
  - enhancing a positive school climate and ethos which promotes pro-social behaviours;
  - providing pre-service and in-service training of all school staff to assist them to recognise and respond appropriately to signs of covert bullying;
  - creating physical environments that limit the invisibility of covert bullying;
  - increasing the awareness among young people of how group mechanisms work and strengthening their skills in conflict resolution; and
  - developing anonymous, peer-led support structures for students to access when they feel uncomfortable.

- To address covert bullying, schools must first review how teachers are currently intervening to reduce this problem and the impact this is having. If covert bullying is believed to be less harmful, not recognised and/or adequately addressed by school staff, students who are covertly bullied are more likely to believe this behaviour is tolerated or condoned, feel less empowered and less willing to tell, which in turn may establish a normative culture of acceptance of this form of behaviour.

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