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Conclusions and education system-level recommendations from the ACBPS

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“ The mental and physical health, social, and academic consequences of bullying have an enormous impact on human and social capital. The costs of bullying burden our education, health care, social services, and criminal justice systems, as well as work force productivity and innovation. ”

(Kandersteg Declaration, Switzerland, June 10, 2007)^[1]

6.1 Introduction

The final stage of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) involved the compilation of major findings from each of the ACBPS sub-studies to describe the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Australian schools. Findings from the ACBPS literature review, qualitative and quantitative sub-studies were used to inform the development of proposed recommendations from the Study. The proposed recommendations were then presented to senior education policy makers and other key stakeholders to provide a realistic understanding of their feasibility, acceptability and potential for adoption and implementation by each State and Territory. This phase was necessary to enhance the policy maker and practitioner acceptability of the ACBPS recommendations. The findings from this stakeholder review were then used to develop the final set of recommendations from the Study.



6.2 Conclusions from the ACBPS

Considered together, the major findings of the four ACBPS sub-studies provide evidence, which can guide teacher and student understandings of covert bullying and the development of strategies to effectively address this behaviour.

The results of the ACBPS show that covert bullying is a fairly common experience among Australian secondary school students, with one in six students (16%) reporting they were bullied covertly every few weeks or more often in the past term. Moreover, covert bullying in Australia is likely to follow international trends and become more prevalent and insidious among students largely due to young people's increasing use of and dependency on information and communications technology to connect with their peers.

Through its review of previously conducted empirical research addressing covert bullying, the ACBPS found that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social and mental health harm than overt bullying ^[2-8], and also has the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale ^[9-11]. Results of the ACBPS quantitative student survey revealed that students who are covertly bullied and/or who covertly bully others, feel less safe and have lower levels of connectedness to and higher levels of loneliness at school, and are more likely to experience emotional symptoms, depression, conduct problems, inattention, social withdrawal and peer relationship problems. Further, the survey results indicated that the academic effects on students who have been covertly bullied include increased nervousness at school and declines in academic engagement and performance. Students in the ACBPS reported qualitatively that if they were covertly bullied they would feel lonely, scared, angry, hurt, annoyed, embarrassed, stressed, helpless, and would not enjoy school. Covert bullying is a complex social process, with insidious effects on adolescent well-being, academic achievement and development, and is therefore an issue of considerable importance to understand and effectively address at a school, education system and national level through joint Government structures.

The ACBPS teacher survey revealed that teachers are more likely to intervene on overt bullying than covert bullying, usually because many schools have clear, standard policies and courses of action for staff to follow if they observe overt bullying ^[13]. Covert bullying by its very nature is difficult to detect and as a result is less likely to be outlined clearly in policy guidelines. The combination of a lack of clear policies and information regarding effective practice appear to be major barriers to teachers/schools effectively addressing this form of bullying ^[14]. Hence, clear national and State guidelines for policy and practice addressing covert bullying are necessary to support schools and their staff.



The ACBPS qualitative survey and empirical research review suggest that students are losing faith in reporting covert bullying because teachers are not recognising this behaviour as bullying and are therefore not taking effective action to address it. The student quantitative survey found that when students tried to seek help from an adult the outcome was often negative, with more students indicating that the bullying stayed the same or got worse (45%) than improved (28%). Students also indicated they are more likely to talk to their friends (64%) to seek help to deal with a bullying problem, than their parents or guardians (57%) and teachers or other staff members (46%). These findings suggest that quality professional learning addressing covert bullying for school staff is essential to effectively prevent and manage covert bullying.

Interestingly just over one quarter of the teachers surveyed (26%) rated their schools' strategies to address bullying as only slightly effective or ineffective, and expressed even greater uncertainty about their schools' ability to effectively address bullying involving technology. The majority (67%) felt other teachers at their school needed more training to enhance their skills to deal with covert bullying incidents and to address covert bullying (including cyber bullying) within the curriculum. The ACBPS data suggest that teachers, who lack training to understand the effects of covert bullying are less able to recognise it, often consider it less serious or problematic, have less empathy for children who are covertly bullied and are less likely to intervene to prevent or manage this behaviour. This inaction on the part of teachers results in students believing that teachers condone this behaviour. Students report that the poor response they get from teachers discourages them from telling when they are covertly bullied. The ACBPS results therefore suggest that education systems and sectors invest in professional learning for school staff to help them understand and effectively address covert bullying, especially given existing policies and practices to deal with bullying may in part have contributed to the emergence of higher levels of covert bullying behaviour.^[18]

The ACBPS results also revealed student factors that were associated with covert bullying behaviour. Students with higher social competence, higher peer support and more negative attitudes to students who bully were less likely to report being bullied. The data also found that students with higher expectations of negative outcomes from bullying were also less likely to report bullying others. Using the peer group as an instrument of aggression requires skills and understanding of group mechanisms and leadership skills. Given covert bullying is a complex social process, involving a high level of everyday social cognition and social intelligence, these results strongly suggest the need to help students to learn how to prevent this form of bullying by understanding group mechanisms and motives for covert bullying, as well as develop social skills and social problem solving, including ways to be an effective bystander. Ideally this learning would mobilise student bystanders to take action when they observe covert bullying (as well as overt bullying) and increase the resilience of students who are bullied covertly.



Because covert bullying and especially cyber bullying is an emerging social phenomenon, mostly involving young people, it is reasonable to suggest the behaviour be examined from a student perspective. To understand and effectively address covert bullying, research requires the ongoing input from students who are involved in and influenced by this behaviour. The collection of both qualitative and quantitative covert bullying data from students as part of the ACBPS provides a rich insight from students of its nature and prevalence in schools. To assess the effectiveness of policy and practice to discourage covert bullying behaviour, ongoing and routine standardised data collection systems for measuring covert bullying behaviour in Australia need to be established to monitor and effectively address this behaviour.

The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) provides an appropriate vehicle to influence national policy and practice with regards to covert bullying. While currently responses to covert bullying are not explicitly described in the Framework, the insidiousness of this behaviour requires that this issue receive greater prominence to build and maintain safe and supportive school environments. The NSSF is also strengthened by legislation that requires all schools to align their policies with the guiding principles of the Framework. As such through this framework schools would be required to take action to reduce the prevalence and deleterious effects of covert bullying behaviour.

In summary, the four sub-studies of the ACBPS, considered together, have demonstrated that covert bullying is a fairly common behaviour among upper primary and secondary school students in Australia that is likely to increase in prevalence, and is associated with harmful effects on adolescent development. Covert bullying by its very nature often goes unnoticed by adults and school staff, and students are less likely to report the occurrence of this form of bullying. It appears that existing policies and practices in schools are inadequate to effectively deal with the issue of covert bullying. Importantly, whilst teachers conveyed a willingness to address covert bullying, they also noted a lack of support and training to do this effectively. The serious effects of this behaviour and the current inability by schools and teachers to adequately address it, warrants the implementation of a sustainable National strategy that considers the recommendations from the ACBPS.



6.3 Draft recommendations from the ACBPS

6.3.1 Procedure

Following compilation of major findings from the ACBPS, draft recommendations from the study were developed. Forty senior education and other key policy stakeholders were consulted during this final stage of the project. These stakeholders were identified during the Phase 4 quantitative data collection and through consultation with DEEWR. The following education sectors and organisations were approached:

- Association of Independent Schools, Australian Capital Territory
- Association of Independent Schools, New South Wales
- Association of Independent Schools, Northern Territory
- Association of Independent Schools, South Australia
- Association of Independent Schools, Tasmania
- Association of Independent Schools, Victoria
- Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia
- Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council Inc (APAPDC)
- Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goldburn
- Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Ballarat
- Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Lismore
- Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta
- Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Toowoomba
- Catholic Education Office, Melbourne
- Catholic Education Office, Northern Territory
- Catholic Education Office, Sydney
- Catholic Education Office, Tasmania
- Catholic Education Office, Townsville
- Catholic Education Office, Western Australia
- Catholic Education Services, Cairns
- Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Brisbane
- Catholic Education, Diocese of Sale
- Catholic Education, Sandhurst
- Catholic Education, South Australia
- Catholic Schools Office, Armidale
- Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Broken Bay

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- Catholic Schools Office, Maitland/Newcastle
 - Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing
 - Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia
 - Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria
 - Department of Education and Training, Australian Capital Territory
 - Department of Education and Training, New South Wales
 - Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory
 - Department of Education, Tasmania
 - Diocesan Catholic Education, Rockhampton
 - Hunter Institute of Mental Health
 - Independent Schools, Queensland
 - National Safe and Supportive Schools Committee
 - NetAlert Section, Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)
 - Student Services Directorate, Education Queensland

Key stakeholders from these organisations were sent a letter and consent form inviting them to participate in this review. The letter outlined the study and the requirements of the recommendations review. Table 6.1 contains the details of those approached and their involvement in the review of the recommendations.

Table 6.1: Senior education and health stakeholders approached, recruited and who responded to the draft ACBPS recommendations review

Organisation/sector	Approached	Recruited	Responded
Association of Independent Schools, Australian Capital Territory	✓		
Association of Independent Schools, New South Wales	✓		
Association of Independent Schools, Northern Territory	✓		
Association of Independent Schools, South Australia	✓	✓	✓
Association of Independent Schools, Tasmania	✓	✓	✓
Association of Independent Schools, Victoria	✓	✓	✓
Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia	✓	✓	✓
Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)	✓	✓	✓
Australian Primary Principals Association	✓		
Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council	✓	✓	
Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goldburn	✓	✓	
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Ballarat	✓	✓	✓
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Lismore	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Toowoomba	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Melbourne	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Northern Territory	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Sydney	✓	✓	✓
Catholic Education Office, Tasmania	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Townsville	✓		
Catholic Education Office, Western Australia	✓		
Catholic Education Services, Cairns	✓	✓	✓
Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Brisbane	✓		
Catholic Education, Diocese of Sale	✓	✓	
Catholic Education, Sandhurst	✓		
Catholic Education, South Australia	✓	✓	
Catholic Schools Office	✓		
Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Broken Bay	✓	✓	
Catholic Schools Office, Maitland/Newcastle	✓		
Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging	✓	✓	



Organisation/sector	Approached	Recruited	Responded
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria	✓	✓	✓
Department of Education and Training, Australian Capital Territory	✓	✓	
Department of Education and Training, New South Wales	✓		
Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory	✓		
Department of Education and Training, South Australia	✓	✓	✓
Department of Education and Training, Tasmania	✓		
Diocesan Catholic Education, Rockhampton	✓	✓	
Hunter Institute of Mental Health	✓	✓	✓
Independent Schools, Queensland	✓	✓✓	✓
Student Services Directorate, Education Queensland	✓		

After extensive follow-up, 21 of the 40 stakeholders approached (see Table 6.1) agreed to be involved in the review and were emailed the draft recommendations and instructions. Again, after numerous follow-up contacts, of the 21 who agreed to participate, 12 stakeholders provided responses to the draft ACBPS recommendations.

This review asked participants to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the draft recommendations and to provide comments or feedback regarding the recommendations feasibility, acceptability and challenges related to their implementation. The draft recommendations were divided into three levels addressing:

1. national policy and practice;
2. state education systems and sectors; and
3. schools.

Following consultation with DEEWR only the draft recommendations for state education systems and sectors and schools were sent to stakeholders for comment.



6.3.2 Results

A summary of responses to the draft recommendations from stakeholders is presented in Table 6.2. Stakeholder agreement with recommendations ranged from 54% to 90%. While overall the majority of stakeholders agreed with most recommendations, a range of important modifications were suggested. Most stakeholders who responded suggested a moderate to high likelihood of implementation for most recommendations. A strong caveat among the responses related to the need for strong leadership, funding and quality support especially for professional learning, as well as resources to help schools to implement the recommendations, and strategies to address competing demands on schools. It was also suggested by most stakeholders that, to increase their likelihood of implementation, the ACBPS recommendations be linked with existing initiatives such as the National Safe Schools Framework.

Table 6.2: Stakeholder agreement with draft ACBPS recommendations for education systems and sectors and schools and suggested modifications

Draft recommendations sent for review	Comments on recommendations (Agree, Disagree, Other – includes non-response, Modifications) (n = 12)	Comments on likelihood of implementation (high, moderate, low, other – includes non-response) & why? (n = 12)
1.0 Recommendations for education systems and sectors		
1.1 Encourage school leadership and other staff to recognise covert bullying as a national priority for ongoing professional development.	<p>Agree (58%, n =7) Disagree (0%, n =0) Other (42%, n = 5)</p> <p><i>Modifications/comments:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include all forms of bullying, not just covert (2) • Should be ongoing, not just a one off, maybe annually and should include PD about how to manage covert bullying (2) • Link to NSSF (1) • Important it is a recognised issue (2) • Start as early as possible (1) • 'National priority' as can be overused in the school system (1) 	<p>High (50%, n =6) Moderate (8%, n =1) Moderate to low (8%, n =1) Other (33%, n = 4)</p> <p><i>Modifications/comments:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link with existing frameworks/ programs/initiatives (1) • Much interest in cyber safety (1) • Leaders need to see bullying as important, then schools will (2) • Link with impaired educational outcomes (3) • Add legal and financial implications (1) • Clearer messages needed about who is accountable for this (1) • Other competing national priorities for schools (2) • Should include other types of bullying as well (1)

1.2 Promote and encourage greater awareness among schools about the NSSF and its implications for students' learning, achievements, health and well being using exemplar case studies.

Agree (75%, n = 9)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (25%, n = 3)

Modifications/comments:

- Should include implications for school attendance (1)
- Use of NSSF may need reframing (3)
- Case studies may not be ideal (1)
- Knowing links between academic achievement and student wellbeing is not enough in itself (1)

High (42%, n = 5)
High to Moderate (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (33%, n = 4)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Practical examples would be useful (1)
- NSSF needs more active dissemination and promotion (2)
- Good to link and keep NSSF alive (3)
- Interest among principals is high (1)
- Requires a coordinated approach across the State/country (1)
- Little improvement has occurred since introduction of NSSF (1)
- Are case studies effective especially in the myriad of independent schools? (1)
- Focus on implications for learning (2)

1.3 Assist district/regional offices to establish links with schools and community structures and services to support students who are vulnerable to covert bullying and to help manage the behaviour of students engaged in this form of bullying.

Agree (58%, n = 7)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Should be for all students, not just targeted (1)
- Important in smaller schools without specialist staff (1)
- Support for school staff would be helpful (1)
- Who in the school has the capacity, access and time to do this? (1)
- Include bystander behaviour (1)
- Resources and funding need for district/regional offices to do this (1)
- Needs to be rolled out logically (1)

Moderate (33%, n = 4)
Low (25%, n = 3)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Requires expertise of staff and assistance for schools (4), and funding for specialist staff (2)
- Schools need to be open to this initiative (1)
- Low for independent schools as local district / regional offices do not exist (1)
- Nationwide implementation may be difficult given divisions – States/ Territories, Government/ independent schools (1)
- Schools already have strong links and are well placed to provide assistance (1)

1.4 Provide access to and support quality professional learning for school staff to help them understand the different forms and potential harms of covert bullying and school inaction, and develop staff attitudes and self-efficacy to take action to address covert bullying behaviour.

Agree (83%, n = 10)

Disagree (0%, n = 0)

Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Currently a high level of teacher discounting, with this happening on weekends (1)
- Need to send all staff, not just specialist staff to PDs (1)

High (17%, n = 2)

Moderate (25%, n = 3)

Moderate to low (8%, n = 1)

Low (8%, n = 1)

Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Linked to legal issues, duty of care (1)
- Funding needed (3) to engage experts (1), for relief staff (2)
- Requires coordinated support (1)
- Needs to be well promoted nationally (1)
- PD should be high quality and have a proven record (2)
- Relief staff not available especially in remote areas (1)
- May be a sense of "we've done it" from teachers. Requires new approach to the delivery model of professional learning (2)

1.5 Ensure new teachers entering the profession and other adults working with young people receive training and experience to deal with covert bullying as part of their professional standards.

Agree (83%, n = 10)

Disagree (0%, n = 0)

Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- May be should be part of schools student wellbeing policy or NSSF guidelines (1)
- Could be part of pre-service training and ongoing professional learning, linked to appropriate professional standards (1)
- Younger teachers are in an ideal situation due to their understanding and experiences of technology (1)

High (25%, n = 3)

Moderate to High (8%, n = 1)

Moderate (9%, n = 1)

Moderate to low (8%, n = 1)

Low (17%, n = 2)

Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- For new teachers (2)
- Occur prior to employment as pre-service teacher training (4)
- New teachers have classroom and curriculum pressures already (1)
- Ongoing training needed with beginner teachers as are novices for at least three years (1)

2.0 Recommendations for schools

2.1 Establish clear policies, programs and procedures, developed in collaboration with staff, students and parents, which explicitly address covert bullying.

Agree (75%, n = 9)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (25%, n = 3)

Modifications/comments:

- Also invite key community agencies e.g.: child and youth health (1)
- Programs and procedures will be important not just policies (1)
- Part of school's registration and annual review (1)

High (42%, n = 5)
Moderate to High (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (8%, n = 1)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Schools concerned about legal implications (1)
- Schools will need support and sample policy to guide them (1)
- Many schools do not have appropriate procedures to deal well with bullying (1)
- Duty of care provides motivation (1)
- Schools will need assistance and a clear framework and strategy (2)

2.2 Survey students to monitor and determine the types of covert and other types of bullying behaviours they are experiencing and in what social contexts, to develop tailored universal and targeted programs to diminish this behaviour.

Agree (66%, n = 8)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Surveys should be implemented at regular intervals to track changes and assess effectiveness of programs (1)
- Respectful of students and relevant, use of their involvement (1)
- the evidence must be built up over time, utilised, revisited, referred to and shared (1)

High (50%, n = 6)
Low (8%, n = 1)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Requires advice and support of outside agencies (3)
- Student voice critical and must be heard when strategies are designed, implemented and monitored (1)
- Requires large commitment, skilled personnel, training, time (1)
- Schools may benefit from existing resources, programs, sample school surveys (1)
- Does this data get reported and if so, to whom and when? (1)

2.3 Provide professional learning and resources to secondary school staff to work with feeder primary schools to reduce the dislodgement of peer groups and subsequent bullying, but particularly covert bullying, which continues to increase following transition to high school.

Agree (66%, n = 8)
Disagree (8%, n = 1)
Other (25%, n = 3)

Modifications/comments:

- Many students don't attend their local school (1)
- Better to work with students to build resilience and prepare for change at primary school and reiterate message once at the school of choice (1)
- What about P-12 independent schools? (1)
- This may be too late. Needs to begin in early grades (1)

High (25%, n = 3)
Moderate (17%, n = 2)
Low (25%, n = 3)
Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Will be high in lower grades (1)
- Growing awareness of importance of good practices re: transition (2)
- How primary and secondary teachers deal with bullying is presently so different (1)
- Most independent schools receive students from a broad range of feeder schools where inter-school relationships are at best informal and often non-existent (1)
- Should be included in the established practices between schools (1)
- May be unrealistic for some secondary schools, perhaps use a broader strategy (2)

2.4 Manage students of high social intelligence who covertly bully others by channelling their understanding of group mechanisms and leadership skills (covert bullying usually requires a high level of social cognition) into more positive outcomes.

Agree (66%, n = 8)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (34%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Staff would really need to know their students (1)
- Needs to be more realistic for schools (1)
- Does this come before programs? (1)
- Does not fit with other recommendations (2)

High (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (42%, n = 5)
Low (17%, n = 2)
Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Could become subjective (2)
- Would need to start in early years (1)
- Skill set and dispositions required of adults in managing such students are often well beyond those of classroom teachers and pastoral care in schools. Many schools don't have counsellors on their staff. Also, issue of involving the parents of such students (1)
- Would require guidance and specific examples (2)
- Challenging unless education leaders embrace student empowerment (1)
- Targeted programs are resource intensive (1)

2.5 Establish with the whole school clear definitions of covert (as well as overt) bullying to ensure this behaviour is more specifically addressed in the school behaviour management policy/anti-bullying policy and practices.

Agree (83%, n = 10)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Consistent messages that are owned and understood by the whole school community are important (1)
- This recommendation needs to be before the policy is developed (1)

High (83%, n = 10)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Incorporate into the existing practices and frameworks in schools (4)

2.6 Address covert bullying especially in the middle school years when it is becoming more prevalent, in concert with improvement in students' language skills and other social-cognitive abilities.

Agree (58%, n = 7)
Disagree (8%, n = 1)
Unclear (17%, n = 2)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- As part of SEL within the curriculum, linked to NSSF and curriculum frameworks (1)
- Should be developmentally appropriate (1)
- Possibly a preventative approach earlier would be more successful (1)
- Not sure how this fits, is not a specific task schools can elect to undertake (1)

High (17%, n = 2)
Moderate (42%, n = 5)
Low (8%, n = 1)
Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Issues of personnel, funding, competing priorities (2)
- Skills are beyond classroom teachers and those with responsibility for pastoral care within schools and are more often found in counsellors. Many schools are without such expertise in their staff (1)
- Could be part of training with a broader focus (1)
- Should include marketing and promotion, links to NSSF and other curriculum frameworks (1)

2.7 Teach students about group mechanisms, motives for bullying and how they may be drawn into this process to help them feel more aware of pressures exerted on the group and their responsibility to deal with them.

Agree (83%, n = 10)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Include emphasis on the bystander (2)

High (25%, n = 3)
Moderate (33%, n = 4)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Provide schools with relevant resources and programs (1)
- Needs to be taught, practiced, and modelled by staff & parents (1)
- Greater emphasis on the teaching of social skills in all year levels (1)

2.8 Examine the determinants of student cyber bullying behaviour not the technology in which it is being manifest.

Agree (58%, n = 7)
Disagree (8%, n = 1)
Other (33%, n = 4)

Modifications/comments:

- Requires greater government resourcing (1)
- Both need to occur for teachers to address this (1)
- Not sure how well this fits as a task for schools (1)

High (25%, n = 3)
Moderate (25%, n = 3)
Low (8%, n = 1)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Parents must be targeted too (1)
- Affected by availability of personnel, funding and competing priorities (1)
- Part of pro-social curriculum in schools (1)

2.9 Identify and help students involved in dysfunctional groups that are likely to have a high level of imbalance of power among group members and are therefore more likely to use covert bullying.

Agree (58%, n = 7)
Disagree (17%, n = 2)
Other (25%, n = 3)

Modifications/comments:

- Should be part of a whole school program (1)

High to mod (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (33%, n = 4)
Low (8%, n = 1)
Other (50%, n = 6)

Modifications/comments:

- Will need to be supported by PD (2)
- Skill set is beyond classroom teachers. These skills are more often found in counsellors, and there are many schools without such expertise on their staff (1)
- Reasonably easy to organise (1)
- Who will staff this? (1)

2.10 Ensure procedural steps to manage covert bullying are clearly documented and roles and responsibilities of staff and students are well understood.

Agree (83%, n = 10)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- Documentation and ownership is important (1)

High (33%, n = 4)
High to mod (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (8%, n = 1)
Other (50%, n = 6)

Modifications/comments:

- Will depend on the capacity of the school to create clear procedures and disseminate information effectively (1)
- Uptake more likely if schools guided to do this (2)

2.11 Create physical environments in schools that limit the invisibility of covert bullying behaviour.

Agree (50%, n = 6)
Disagree (8%, n = 1)
Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- Nil

High (8%, n = 1)
High to mod (8%, n = 1)
Mod (25%, n = 3)
Low (8%, n = 1)
Other (50%, n = 6)

Modifications/comments:

- Schools will need assistance in this area through professional learning (2)
- Very difficult to ensure this. Finding the right balance between the need for students to have their space, and the need to create safe spaces can be challenging (1)
- May push covert bullying underground even more (2)

2.12 Support parents through parent awareness raising and skill building training and support.

Agree (92%, n = 11)
Disagree (0%, n = 0)
Other (8%, n = 1)

Modifications/comments:

- Many parents feel powerless. Would require input from professionals with appropriate expertise to ensure success(1)

High (25%, n = 3)
High to low (8%, n = 1)
Moderate (17%, n = 2)
Other (50%, n = 6)

Modifications/comments:

- Needs systematic approach and encouragement and support (3)



2.13 Maintain clear communication with parents about covert bullying behaviour and effective ways to deal with it.

Agree (83%, n = 10)

Disagree (0%, n = 0)

Other (17%, n = 2)

Modifications/comments:

- On a regular basis (1)
- Many parents are unaware of warning signs (1)

High (17%, n = 2)

High to low (8%, n = 1)

Moderate (33%, n = 4)

Other (42%, n = 5)

Modifications/comments:

- If ongoing and systematic (1)
- Keeping parents in the loop is important (1)
- Strategies need to show schools how to do this (3)

*Responses may add up to 99% and not 100% because of rounding of decimal places.

(n) – number of respondents who made this comment

6.4 Final ACBPS recommendations

To reduce the prevalence of covert bullying in Australian schools the following recommendations are made to national and State policy makers, researchers and practitioners. These recommendations are based on findings from the preceding four phases of this systematic study and include the feedback provided by education policy makers and other stakeholders. They are also in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991) ^[19], the WHO Report on Violence and Health (2002) ^[20], and the 2007 Kandersteg Declaration Against Bullying in Children and Youth ^[1].

These recommendations aim to increase among school communities' their knowledge of and skills to effectively respond via policy and practice to reduce harm to students from covert bullying.

Table 6.3: Final ACBPS recommendations

Recommendations	
1.0	Recommendations for national policy and practice
Short term recommendations	
1.1	Establish an Australian Council for Bullying Prevention that reports to the Prime Minister, chaired by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, to lead the review of the National Safe Schools Framework and the concurrent development of a strategy that considers the following recommendations.
1.2	Facilitate sustainable joint Government structures (including education, health, community development, and justice) and approaches to deliver key reforms.
1.3	Facilitate ongoing and active input from teachers, parents, and young people through linking with existing groups and organisations, such as the Safe and Supportive School Communities, the Consultative Working Group on cyber safety, and parent, teacher and student bodies.
1.4	Revise the National Safe Schools Framework and its implementation in schools to explicitly encourage schools to address covert and overt bullying and provide the necessary resources to support schools to minimise this bullying through their policy and practice.
Longer term recommendations	
1.5	Establish ongoing and routine data collection systems with standardised methods for defining and measuring covert and overt forms of bullying.
1.6	Facilitate sustainable longitudinal research to investigate the developmental trajectory, causes, protective factors, social and economic costs, societal and cultural influences, and identify the windows of opportunity for covert bullying prevention and intervention.

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- 1.7 Support applied intervention research to determine the impact of promising strategies to reduce covert bullying that protect and support those involved, promote healthy relationships, reduce perpetration of bullying, and change the circumstances and conditions (individual, relationship, society, structural) that give rise to covert bullying.
 - 1.8 Leverage the effectiveness of these interventions by establishing and evaluating linkages between these interventions with other programs such as those addressing domestic violence, aggression, harassment and child abuse.
 - 1.9 Assess the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of bullying prevention and reduction interventions and determine the thresholds of level of implementation necessary to reduce both overt and covert bullying.
 - 1.10 Work collaboratively with systems and sectors to support and monitor the implementation of the revised National Safe Schools Framework.

2.0 Recommendations for education systems and sectors

- 2.1 Encourage school leadership and other staff to recognise in an ongoing manner that covert bullying is as important as overt bullying and forms part of the National Safe Schools Framework as a national priority for ongoing professional development.
- 2.2 Promote and encourage greater awareness among schools about the National Safe Schools Framework and its implications for students' learning, achievements, health and well being.
- 2.3 Assist district/regional offices to establish links with schools and community structures and services to support students who are vulnerable to covert bullying and to help manage the behaviour of students engaged in this form of bullying.
- 2.4 Provide access to and support quality professional learning for school staff to help them understand the different forms and potential harms of covert bullying and school inaction, and develop staff attitudes and self-efficacy to take action to address bullying behaviour, particularly covert bullying.
- 2.5 Ensure new teachers entering the profession and other adults working with young people as part of their professional standards receive pre-service training and ongoing professional learning to help prevent and manage bullying especially covert bullying behaviour.

3.0 Recommendations for schools

- 3.1 Establish with the whole school clear definitions of covert (as well as overt) bullying to ensure this behaviour is more specifically and consistently addressed in the school and understood by the whole school.
- 3.2 Establish clear policies, programs and procedures, developed in collaboration with staff, students and parents, which explicitly address covert bullying as part of the school's response to all forms of bullying.
- 3.3 Ensure procedural steps to manage covert bullying are developed by the whole school collaboratively and are clearly documented, and the roles and responsibilities of staff, students and parents are well understood.

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- 3.4 Survey students regularly to monitor and determine the types of covert and overt forms of bullying behaviours they are experiencing and in what social contexts, to develop tailored universal and targeted programs to diminish this behaviour.
 - 3.5 Address covert and overt forms of bullying throughout schooling to ameliorate their harms in concert with improvement in students' language skills and other social-cognitive abilities.
 - 3.6 Teach students about social skills, group mechanisms, motives for bullying, being effective bystanders and how they may be drawn into the bullying process, to help them feel more aware of pressures exerted on the group and their responsibility to deal with them.
 - 3.7 Examine the determinants of student cyber bullying behaviour as part of the whole school response to bullying, not the technology in which it is being manifest.
 - 3.8 Provide professional learning and resources to help primary and secondary school staff to enhance student transition and reduce the subsequent bullying, particularly covert bullying, which continues to increase following transitions in school.
 - 3.9 Create physical environments in schools and staff supervision practices that limit the invisibility of covert bullying behaviour.
 - 3.10 Support families through systematic parent awareness raising and skill building, training and support.
 - 3.11 Maintain regular, clear communication with parents about covert bullying behaviour and effective ways to deal with it.

6.5 References

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