

# Bullies – why they do it

Parents have had enough, teachers have had enough and Lord knows the victims have had enough, but who's listening to the bullies? Story by **Margaret de Silva**

**S**oftly spoken and polite, 14-year-old James\* seems an unlikely school bully. He wants to be a police officer one day, or maybe join the army, he enjoys playing tennis and hanging out with his grandparents. But at school, for as long as he can remember, James has been in trouble constantly for picking on other kids.

He says he can't recall a time when he acted differently, but says the bullying started to get "really bad" when he was in grade four. At only nine years of age, James would hit other kids, tease them and subject them to humiliation. He could work out who the easy targets were, and who would fight back.

"I once picked on this one kid so bad that he actually left the school," James says matter-of-factly and with no tone of satisfaction in his voice. He says that after that incident the other kids in his class started treating him differently. "They didn't really hang around me much before," he says. "But after that, yeah, they were nicer."

He would be punished for his behaviour, but James says it didn't make a difference. "It was sort of fun, in a weird way I like getting in trouble," he says. "It's the adrenaline rush of somebody yelling at you. It's going to make me want to do it more." Although he was diagnosed with ADHD his teachers continued to yell at him, which just egged him on.

Five years later, James says he didn't think about the consequences at the time and admits that picking on shy, weaker kids meant that he was known as a tough kid at school. "No kids would pick on me," he says. "They knew I'd just punch them back."

But it doesn't always stop there. Last month 12-year-old Elliot Fletcher died after a knife attack at St Patrick's College in Shorncliffe, prompting the State Government to establish the Queensland Schools Alliance Against Violence. Parents have had enough and want to know how to protect their children. But what about the bullies? Can we stop them?

Bullying expert and consultant Dr Kenneth Rigby recently compiled a report

on bullying in Queensland schools for the State Government. Dr Rigby says bullying is more than just random violence, it's deliberate and repeated behaviour used to enforce a feeling of power.

He says some children are predisposed to be more aggressive than others, and this is usually noticeable by the time a child is two or three years old. "Children that haven't been restrained early on learn how to get what they want from people," he says.

Queensland University of Technology psychologist Dr Marilyn Campbell agrees. She says there are generally two waves of bullying in schools, with the first signs of deliberate bullying usually obvious in grade four or five. "By the time children are eight or nine, they work out that there are some kids who seem more vulnerable and that if they intimidate them, they can get what they want, or they get a reaction from them that makes them feel powerful," she says.

For these younger children, Campbell says schools need to teach positive relationships. But she acknowledges this can be a problem as many children learn how to bully from their parents and schools can have trouble engaging with the families, who may condone the behaviour.

Research has shown that the roles of bully and victim are not always clearly defined. Rigby says in 20 per cent of cases, the bully has been a victim of bullying in the past. That was the case for 14-year-old Matthew\*, who was teased throughout primary school for being overweight, before asserting his position at his high school by picking on those weaker than himself.

"I think that's why I have all this anger and I just wanted to take it out on other people," he says. "I'd just pick on anyone that really frustrated or annoyed me."

For Matthew and James, their behaviour became so unacceptable that both boys were expelled from their state high schools. They are now students at Toogoolawa in Ormeau, a small school for boys who are no longer welcome in the mainstream education system. The school has 19 students enrolled,

with a ratio of one teacher to every four students. The school's philosophy focuses on looking after the character of the student before their academic ability, with a code of ethics focused on love, truth, peace, right conduct and non-violence.

Toogoolawa principal Gerry Maloney says not enough is done to intervene in the behaviour of bullies in mainstream schools because there are not enough resources, nor are the teachers always trained to deal with high-stress situations.

"You really need the teacher to be the role model," he says. "If you had some of these kids in your class you'd want to scream at them, they'd get you that frustrated. Our teachers know they have to deal with those emotions in a different way."

Maloney says more attention needs to be paid to bullies and that labelling children can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If people tell you every day you're an idiot, you're a bully, that's the behaviour you show," he says.

Dr Marilyn Campbell says schools need to focus on the behaviour of bullies now to avoid boardroom bullies or family bullies in the future. She says that bullies at school can go on to have as many mental health problems as their victims. "We often concentrate on the victims, as we should, and we know the dreadful consequences for the victim, but I don't think people have looked at the consequences of engaging in bullying behaviour," she says. "They're still somebody's children and they're part of our society."

Campbell and Rigby advocate that schools teach pro-social behaviour, particularly in preparation for high school. "It's a matter of trying to help children to establish better relationships and maintain better relationships rather than try to fix somebody who has a personality defect or some kind of defect," Rigby says.

James and Matthew say their behaviour was unacceptable. "I feel really guilty for what I've done to those people who really haven't done anything," says Matthew. "I know I'm behaving a lot better now."