

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Bullying and young Australians



About ReachOut Australia

ReachOut is Australia's leading online mental health organisation for young people and their parents. Our practical support, tools and tips help young people get through anything from everyday issues to tough times – and the information we offer parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too.

We've been changing the way people access help since we launched the world's first online mental health service nearly 20 years ago. Everything we create is based on the latest evidence and designed with experts, and young people or their parents. This is why our digital self-help tools are trusted, relevant and easy to use.

Available for free anytime and pretty much anywhere, ReachOut is accessed by 132,000 people in Australia every month. That's more than 1.58 million each year.

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Executive summary

Bullying is when people repeatedly and intentionally use words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing. People who do it usually have more influence or power over someone else, or want to make someone else feel less powerful or helpless.

Bullying is a crucial issue for young people in Australia, with as many as 1 in 4 students reporting being bullied every few weeks of more.¹ Young people also witness their friends being bullied or can engage in bullying behaviour themselves.

TOP INSIGHTS

- ▶ Of the 1000 14–25-year-olds surveyed, 23% had experienced bullying in the last 12 months.
- ▶ Many of the young people surveyed experienced bullying in multiple places. Over half (52%) of them experienced bullying at school, followed by the workplace (25.3%) and online (25.3%).
- ▶ Approximately half of the young people surveyed had sought help or support for their experiences of bullying.
- ▶ Of the young people who sought help for bullying, 48% turned to their parents for support, 33% to their friends, 28.7% to a doctor or GP, and 24% to teachers.
- ▶ The top reasons for not seeking support were stigma, embarrassment and fear of being seen as 'weak', feeling that they could handle it on their own, and a perception that the problem wasn't serious enough to seek help.
- ▶ Information and support on bullying is some of the most accessed content at ReachOut, with 138,000 visits to bullying-related content during 2016.



Key insights from the literature



What is bullying?

Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological aggressive behaviour by a person or group directed towards a less powerful person or group that is intended to cause harm, distress or fear.² Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert).³

Prevalence of bullying

A study that sampled 20,832 Australian students aged between 8 and 14 years found that 1 in 4 students reported being bullied every few weeks or more, with the highest prevalence rates being reported by children in Year 5 (ages 10–11).¹ Mission Australia's annual youth survey found that 1 in 5 young people indicated high levels of personal concern about personal safety and bullying.⁴

Bullying can affect anybody, but vulnerable students who are more at risk of bullying include young people experiencing homelessness, young people with a disability, same sex attracted young people, and young people from racial, ethnic and religious minorities.⁴

The effects of bullying

Bullying is a crucial issue that has negative impacts for the person being bullied, bystanders, the person bullying others and the school as a whole.¹

Experiencing bullying can make people feel alone, unsafe, afraid, stressed, ashamed and rejected.⁵ It can lead to school avoidance, poorer educational outcomes and reduced psychological wellbeing, as well as long-term negative mental health outcomes.⁶

People who engage in bullying behaviour are more likely to dislike or feel disconnected from school, to get into fights and to leave school early.²

Online survey

METHODS

In December 2016, ReachOut Australia conducted an online survey of 1000 young people aged 14–25 years from across Australia.

Participants were recruited via an online research panel. The sample was a nationally representative 50/50 split of males and females from metropolitan and regional locations.

FINDINGS

Experience of bullying

When asked, 23% of the sample said they had experienced bullying behaviour in the past 12 months.

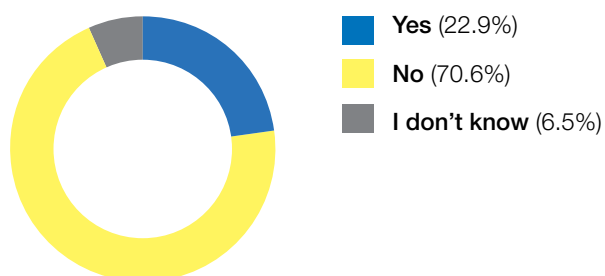


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who had experienced bullying behaviour in the past 12 months ($n = 1000$)

I didn't want to talk about it 'cause I felt like I sounded weak and I didn't want to make the bullying worse by getting someone involved. I did not talk to anyone because I thought I was just being oversensitive and bullying in the work place is something that everyone has to deal with.
Anonymous

Where young people experience bullying

The 229 young people who experienced bullying were asked where the bullying behaviour took place. Over half (52%) indicated that they experienced bullying at school, followed by the workplace (25.3%) and online (25.3%). Many young people experienced bullying in multiple locations.

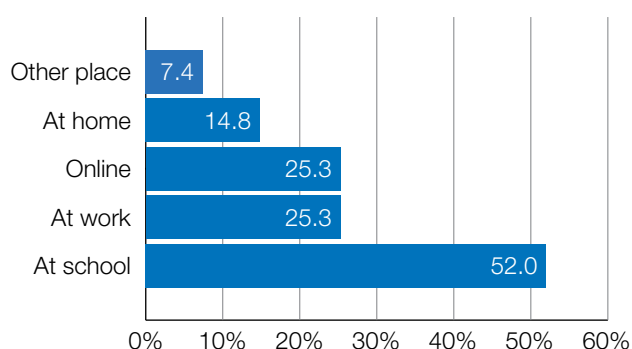


Figure 2. Locations where respondents had experienced bullying (many respondents chose multiple locations; $n = 229$)

Seeking help for bullying

The 229 young people who experienced bullying were asked if they sought help or support for bullying. Just over half (50.2%) indicated that they did seek help, while just under half (49.8%) did not seek help.



Figure 3. Proportion of young people who had sought help or support after experiencing bullying ($n = 229$)

Sources of help for young people experiencing bullying

Young people were most likely to access support from a parent (47.8%), friend (33%), doctor or GP (28.7%), teacher (24.3%) or intimate partner (16.5%). Other sources of support included searching online (6.1%), seeing a mental health professional (14.8%), accessing a Headspace centre (12.2%), contacting a youth or community centre (12.2%), calling a phone helpline (9.6%), and other sources as outlined below.

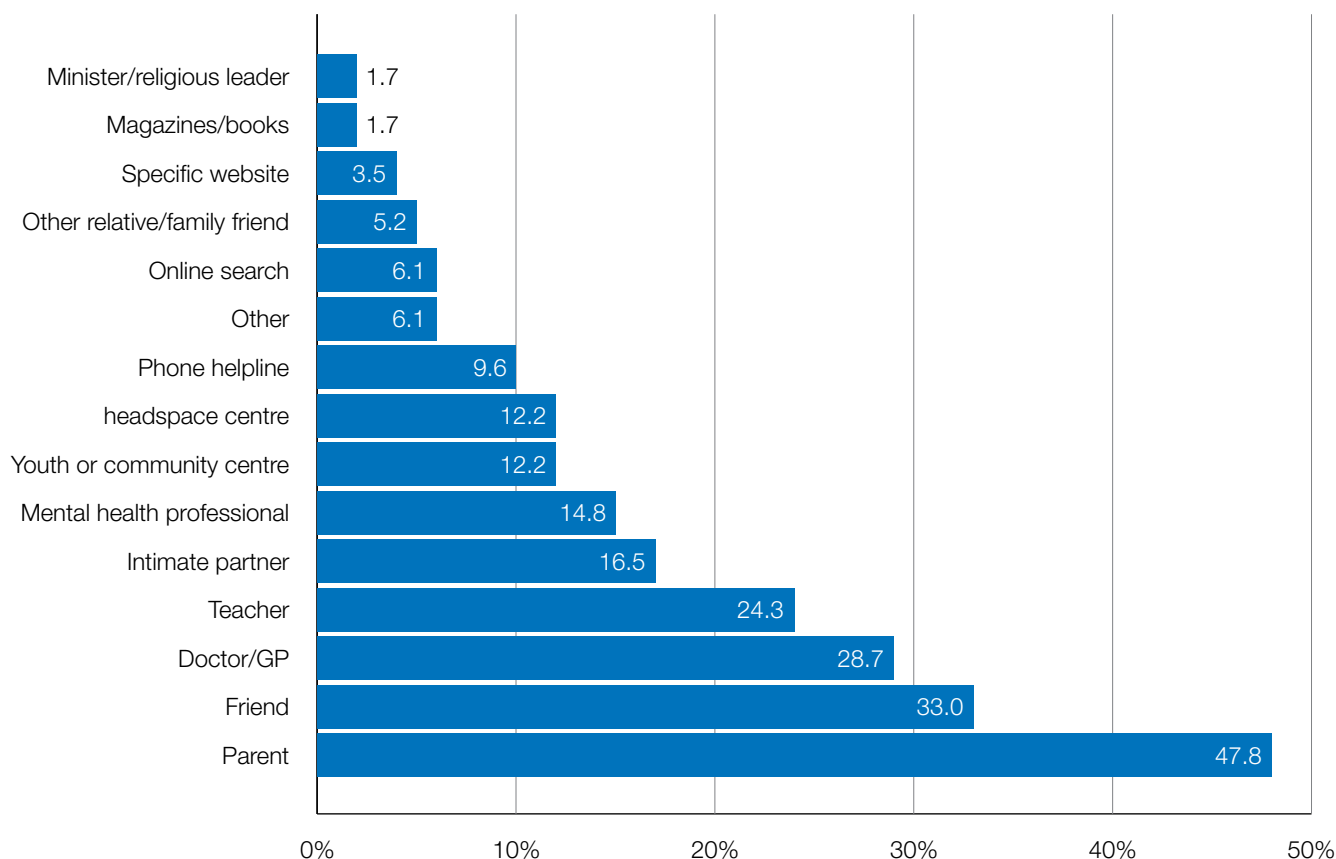


Figure 4. Types of help accessed by young people who had sought help for bullying (multiple responses permitted; $n = 115$)

Reasons young people did not seek help for bullying

The young people who had not accessed support responded to an open-ended question about why they did not seek help or support for bullying. The top reasons for not seeking support were stigma, embarrassment and fear of being seen as 'weak', feeling that they could handle it on their own, and a perception that the problem wasn't serious enough to seek help.

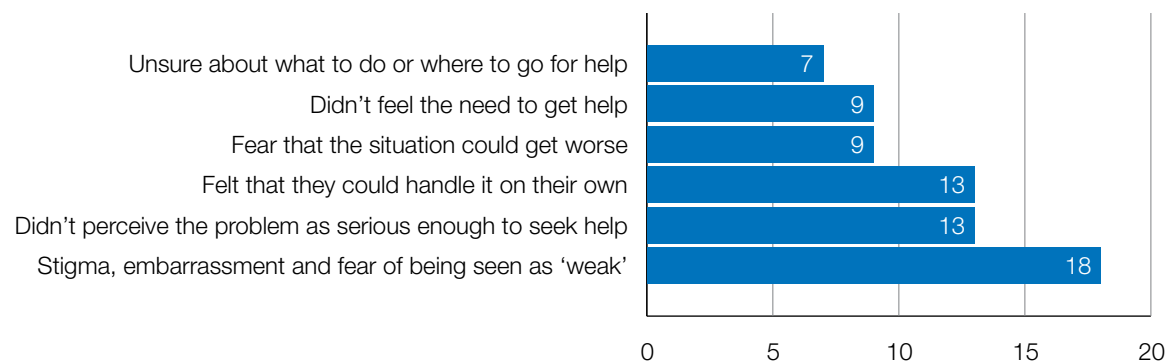


Figure 5. Top reasons for not seeking support after experiencing bullying (number of young people; multiple responses permitted; $n = 69$)

User research

In all our services at ReachOut, end users (young people) are involved as active participants and co-designers throughout the design research process. They participate in ideas generation, as well as providing opinions and feedback on existing design concepts. Our services are continually evaluated from the perspective of whether they are relevant, meaningful and engaging to the young people and parents who stand to benefit from them.

In 2016, ReachOut conducted qualitative research to understand the experiences of young people on the topic of bullying and to inform content and advice to support them.

METHODS

Diary study

This was an exploratory research project that included research with service providers, 12–14-year-olds and their parents. The research was carried out in a number of stages.

Researchers interviewed seven service providers who worked with young people (teachers, school counsellors and psychologists) and 13 parents of young people aged 12–14 years. Following this, 13 young people aged 12–14 (the children of the parents that were interviewed) participated in a diary study for seven days and carried out a number of activities while either using a video camera or journaling aspects of their lives. These young people then participated in a follow-up interview.

Co-design workshops

These workshops involved 11 young people aged 16–25 years. All the young people had experienced or witnessed bullying behaviour and were able to reflect back on these experiences.

Participants completed an online pre-task before coming along to a two-hour workshop. The pre-task asked them to share their own experiences of bullying, what helped and hindered, and what advice they would give others in a similar situation. Following this, participants attended a co-design workshop where they engaged in group activities and discussions about actionable and multimedia bullying content.



FINDINGS

Young people's definition and experiences of bullying

[If I could wish for anything,] I would say for less people to be bullies and more people to get along at school. So you can just not have that tension, if you walk past each other, you can say hello to them, start a conversation.

Anonymous

Almost all young people are affected by bullying, experiencing it themselves, witnessing a friend being bullied or engaging in bullying behaviour. They are bullied for various reasons, and it often occurs both in person and online.

Participants reported that bullying took a variety of forms and included verbal bullying (spreading rumours and name-calling), physical bullying, exclusion and cyberbullying. It was often a combination, and not always just one or another form. (For example, bullying experienced at school was also occurring on social media.)

Participants were likely to turn to their peers and, in many cases, their parents for support. Some schools and teachers were able to intervene successfully; at other times, students felt that teachers were not very helpful.

Service providers gave examples of online bullying, including students creating social media pages to make fun of particular students and teachers, and group chats where young people 'gang up' on others.

The only thing I was worried about was people teasing me because of my hair colour. In the first two or three terms, this one group of friends now that I hang out with, they play footy with me, they would call me a ginger every day. Like he would call out from across the quad and then other people would scream it out. I would be the only redhead person in the quad and everyone would point at me and scream, ginger.

Anonymous

How bullying intersects with friendship issues

Peer relationships are incredibly important for young people, particularly during the transition from primary to high school and in the early high-school years. These friendships can be a source of distress, as well as a significant support. The line between friendship problems and bullying can sometimes become blurred.

Friendship issues are massive. Peer interaction is everything. They're mixing over the internet instead of face to face.

Service provider

Friendship issues were the most common issue reported by young people, their parents and service providers. Friendship issues caused significant stress for almost all participants, particularly as they were transitioning from primary into high school.

Many participants had experienced conflict, or had lost touch with friends, formed new friendship groups, and experienced turbulence among their peers. Exclusion, or being 'left out', spreading rumours and being in the middle of fighting best friends were all experienced by participants. Specific events, including birthday parties, could cause heightened stress about their peers (for example, whether they would be invited to friends' parties, whether people would turn up to theirs, etc.).

Parents and service providers commented on the role that social media plays with these friendship issues, with young people being connected for longer periods of time through group chats, etc. A parent gave an example of friendship issues on social media, where young people would remove or exclude people from their lists of friends on Instagram.

Peer connection could also be positive for many young people, who turned to peers for support and cited best friends as some of the most influential and supportive people in their life.

Where do young people turn for help with bullying, and what stops them from getting support?

Parents and peers are the first place many young people turn to for support with bullying, followed by teachers and school (depending on the relationship). Many also seek information online. Things that stop young people asking for support include feelings of fear, anxiety and embarrassment, worrying that people won't believe them, and not wanting to make the situation worse.

Young people aged 12–14 tend to turn to their peers for help, and at least half also turn to their parents. Some also turn to siblings and other relatives.

Young people in this age group are more likely to seek help if one of their friends has already done so.

[Fourteen]-year-olds will suss us out for a period of time – e.g. one person sent her friends for 12 months before she decided to come.

Service provider

There were mixed responses about whether young people would tell a teacher, depending on whether they had a pre-existing positive relationship with that teacher.

What things helped young people the most when they were being bullied?

Young people were asked about what helped them the most when they were experiencing bullying. The most helpful advice was:

- ▶ **Relationships:** All participants commented on the importance of having friends from places outside of school, such as work or sport. However, they also acknowledged that it can be difficult for some, especially if they are already feeling down or isolated.
- ▶ **Distraction/enjoyable activity:** Watching TV, listening to music, watching or playing sport.
- ▶ **Talking to a close relative or friend:** 'Talking with someone you trust about the situation helps you put your own thoughts into perspective and feel loved and heard.'
- ▶ **Confronting the bully:** Letting them know how it makes you feel.
- ▶ **Removing yourself from the situation:** One of the most helpful things that all participants found was removing themselves from the situation (for example, changing schools or workplaces). However, this isn't realistic for all young people.

The most common unhelpful advice was to 'ignore it', as this is easier said than done and not particularly practical. Other unhelpful advice included writing in a diary, going for a walk and working it out for yourself.

Overall, unhelpful advice was that which was overly simplistic and didn't consider the complexity of bullying.



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