



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the management and minimisation of bullying
and violence in ACT schools

Submission Number: 14

Date Authorised for Publication: 21 May 2019

UNDERSTANDING AND MINIMISING AGGRESSION IN SCHOOLS

Understanding aggression in schools

To successfully manage and minimise bullying and violence in ACT schools it is critical to have a clear understanding that bullying and violence is an ecological dynamic. That is, bullying and violence is caused by a myriad of issues and factors that influence and interact with each other to cause bullying and violence.

However, many people in the community including some teachers subscribe consciously and unconsciously to what could be called the ‘medical model’. This model emphasises that the causes of bullying and violence just resides within the individual or family. Under this model the assumption is that if you treat the individual (eg counselling) or family (eg family supports or therapy) then the bullying and violence will not occur. Belief in this model underlies the rationale to remove a student with challenging behaviours from a school and place them in a special setting to be ‘treated’. Once they have gone through the special program they can return to school and get on with their learning without being a threat to others. This is like giving an antibiotic to cure the illness and then everything can return to normal. Unfortunately many students return to their previous behaviours when they come back to their school.

The [ecological model](#) applied to school aggression would acknowledge that individual and family characteristics and issues contribute to bullying and violence but it would also recognise that the curriculum, teacher pedagogy and social/emotional skills, peer problems, school organisation and policy issues also play a role. This model also goes as far as suggesting economic conditions also play a role (eg via stress on the family). School-based factors can directly encourage aggression or interact with individual and family factors to increase the likelihood of bullying and violence occurring. The interaction between school and individual/family factors are the most common causes for aggression with students.

All of these factors interact with and influence the developing brain of children and young people. Areas in the brain responsible for responding to stress and danger (eg amygdala) are close to fully developed at birth, and their message pathways to engage in fight or flight behaviours are also well developed. Pathways to areas of the brain (prefrontal cortex) that exert control and dampen fight, flight or risky behaviours are underdeveloped, and only become fully mature by the average age of 25 years old (car insurance companies have known this for years). It is important to recognise that fight, flee or freeze responses are a normal part of our brain function.

Parents and teachers intuitively know that their role is to help children and young people to develop control over feelings of frustrations and anger. It is only with parent and teacher (and other adults like coaches etc) support over time, that neural pathways will develop between the prefrontal cortex

and the amygdala which dampens down fight/flight behaviours and leads to mature pro-social individuals. Experience and guidance develop these neural pathways. (Cozolino 2013¹)

How does each factor increase the likelihood of aggression or bullying

Individual and family factors:

The individual student factors that can contribute to aggression include learning difficulties and disabilities, developmental trauma, poor relationship skills, learnt social mores from the family about how you treat people, personal dispositions (anxious, impulsive, irritable), and various syndromes and disabilities.

When a student is in difficult situations, these factors may increase the likelihood of the young person becoming frustrated and overwhelmed with strong feelings (often shame and anger), which can lead to aggressive behaviours directed at their peers or teachers. When it comes to bullying the role and influence of families in all forms of bullying is significant, particularly in teaching children ways of relating to others ([Australian Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group, \(SSSC 2015\)](#)).

Families are the first ‘teachers’ of children and are very influential for learning about how safe the world is and how you relate to others. Major neural pathways for emotional regulation and trusting relationships are laid down and established in the first 5 years of life. Issues like family violence, sexual, physical and emotion abuse, and neglect contribute to developmental trauma, and convey social and relationship mores about how you treat and respond to people. Harsh, inconsistent and chaotic parenting styles also contribute to students who are aggressive, bully and are bullied. (SSSC 2015).

Developmental trauma has a significant impact on how children develop the ability to regulate their emotions and appropriately interpret social cues; combine this with negative family beliefs about how you treat people and any perceived challenge in the school environment (eg difficult learning task, a student who was laughing and looked at another student) is likely to result in an aggressive response or they run away.

School Factors:

The curriculum and teacher pedagogy can influence aggression in young people. If the curriculum is not pitched at the right level (beyond the developmental capacity or learning ability of student) a student can feel ‘stupid’. If the student has learning difficulties then this poorly pitched curriculum will interact with this issue and overwhelm the student which can lead to aggression, withdrawal or flight. If the teacher has poor pedagogical skills including chaotic classroom processes and organisation then vulnerable students feel like they are not coping with the work, then experience a significant increase in stress and the likelihood of aggression. Interestingly research now indicates that a teachers’ own social emotional competencies influences the learning experiences of students ([US National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development 2019](#)) and that relational

¹ Cozolino, L.. (2013) *The social neuroscience of education: Optimising attachment and learning in the classroom*. Norton and Company. New York.

challenges experienced in the classroom create roadblocks in a student's brain for learning (Olson 2014²).

There is a sizeable body of research (SSSC 2015 and Youth.gov) which has identified that a school's climate and culture significantly influences the amount of physical, verbal and social bullying and aggression that occurs amongst a school's student body. School climate is the observable milieu created by interactions among and between adults and students. The school's climate is the observable element of school processes, and the values and norms shared by members of the school (also known as school culture). School leadership plays a critical role in reducing aggression and bullying as they are responsible for and communicate the values and norms of the school. They are responsible for developing and consistently applying processes and procedures that convey these values and norms. Both teachers and students have been found to recognise that school leadership influences students' behaviour management through policies and procedures ([Nooruddin et al 2014](#)).

Research by the ANU in Canberra schools has found 'positive school climate are significantly related to the school outcomes of academic achievement, well-being, and bullying/aggression. Furthermore, positive changes in school climate perceptions and school identification over time (three years) are related to improved student engagement and decreased bullying' ([ANU website accessed 2019](#)).

Public school systems are guided by policies which are typically developed by a centralised support office, often in consultation with schools and the community. How policies that focus on school safety and bullying are adopted and operationalised in a school, will influence the degree to which student aggression and violence occur in that school. Some schools implement these policies with fidelity and other schools need support to implement these policies effectively.

Minimising Aggression in Schools

Using an ecological model is helpful in gaining a holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to violence and bullying in schools. A holistic understanding means you know what needs to be addressed. Having an evidence based model to guide interventions is also important to ensure all factors that contribute to violence and bullying are addressed effectively.

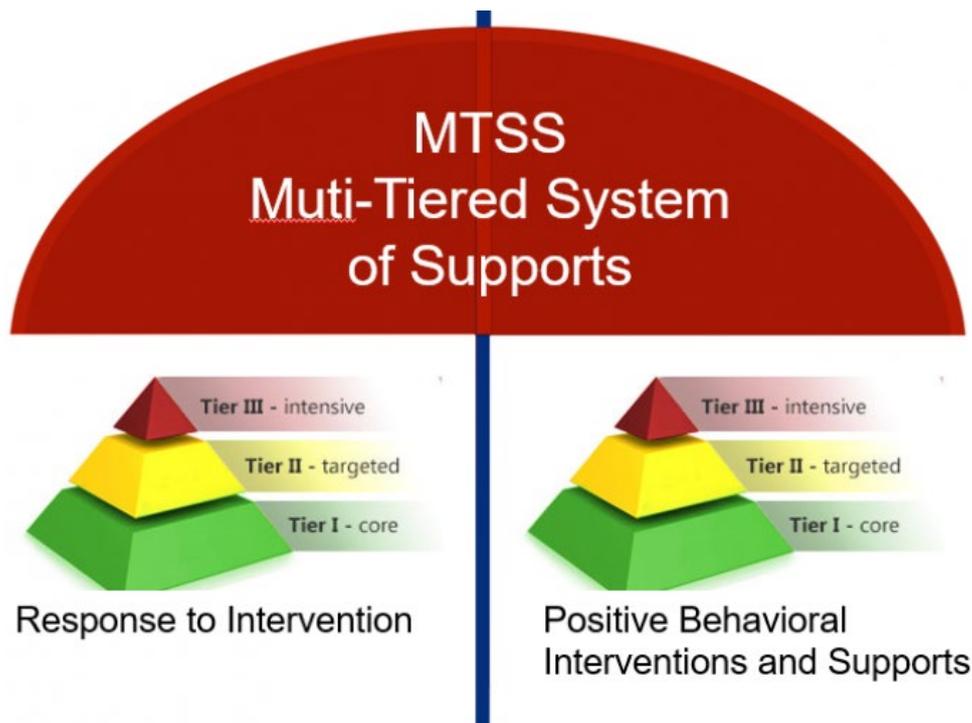
The following recommendations have been shown to reduce aggression and bullying in schools.

Implement Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for behaviour and learning

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support is an overarching term used for models that use a three tiered triangle approach to address either behavioural issues or improve academic outcomes in schools.

² Olsen, K.. (2014) *The invisible classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience and Mindfulness in Schools*. Norton and Company. New York.





Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (Image from: <https://mybrainware.com/knowledge-center/blogs/cognitive-skills-and-mtss-multi-tiered-systems-of-support/> accessed 24/4/19)

Terms used in MTSS models can vary. In the ACT Tier 1 is referred to as 'Universal', Tier 2 is 'Selected' and Tier 3 'Targeted'. Universal strategies are what everyone in the school experiences, Selected is for particular groups of students (eg a social skills group for students who need help in this area) and Targeted is intensive support for a particular student and their family. Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) for improved behaviours and Response to Intervention for improved academic outcomes have over 30 years of evidenced base practice behind them. In Australia, PBIS is often referred to as Positive Behaviours for Learning (PBL).

PBL

At each level of PBL there are designated processes and strategies to follow that have a strong evidence base on their effectiveness. The most important tier of PBL is Tier 1 or the Universal level. If Tier 1 is not carried out or half heartedly implemented then interventions at Tier 2 and 3 will not be as effective. PBL recognises that student aggression and misbehaviour is an ecological dynamic.

In PBL Tier 1 focuses on developing the vision, norms and behavioural expectations inside and outside the classroom. This is collaboratively developed with staff and students, and students have explicit lessons in learning the behaviours associated with each expectation. Systems are put in place to support teachers to recognise and provide feedback to students when they are 'doing the right thing'. Tier 2 focuses on small groups and individualises strategies within the school to support students who have difficulty engaging in their learning, and Tier 3 focuses on developing complex behaviour support plans for an individual student co-ordinated with the family, agencies and health professionals.

PBL is predominately focused on establishing behavioural expectations, practising behaviours consistent with those expectations, providing positive feedback and addressing the support needs of particular students. PBL also supports teachers to develop effective classroom practices and look at how the curriculum should be adjusted for particular students.

As mentioned earlier many students who engage in violence and bullying have trauma backgrounds. Any interventions with the student and or family will be long term and positive changes are slow in coming. However, school can take on a trauma informed or trauma aware approach to be sensitive to the needs of these students and reduce negative behaviours. The implementation of PBL in ACT Public Schools has integrated an understanding of trauma into their training with schools. For further information about trauma informed/sensitive/aware schools please see the following links. <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/> or <https://traumaawareschools.org/>.

Implementation of the PBL (PBIS) was a recommendation in the Report of the Expert Panel on Students with Challenging Behaviours and Complex needs. The ACT Public School system is systematically implementing PBL within their schools. Most Australian jurisdictions are now adopting PBL. For more information please refer to: www.pbis.org.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Response to Intervention is a MTSS model that is very useful in identifying and supporting students with learning difficulties. Like all MTSS models the most important level is Tier 1 or the Universal level. Schools that use RTI will ensure that evidence-based approaches to learning occur for all students. With regular screening tests students' teachers can identify who are succeeding and who need additional support. Those students who need additional support still receive Tier 1 teaching but also receive Tier 2 support in the form of small group work to develop their skills. Regular screening tests determine when a student is performing at the relevant peer level and no longer needs Tier 2 support. Students that are not progressing after 6 months at Tier 2 can then access Tier 3 support which involves one on one tuition with evidence-based programs.

This approach can deal with the root cause of those students who become aggressive because of learning difficulties. It also dramatically improves learning outcomes for students with learning difficulties. For more information please see <http://www.rtinetwork.org>

Implement explicit social, emotional and cognitive skills programs

The US National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development has published a report [*From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope*](#) (2019). The report has identified that for school aggression to reduce and to improve academic outcomes schools need to: explicitly teach and practice social, emotional and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academic learning; and create safe, relationship-based equitable learning environments.

Social, emotional and cognitive skills refer to:

1. Cognitive skills and competencies which include the ability to focus and pay attention, set goals, plan and organise, and persevere and problem solve.
2. Social and interpersonal skills and competencies which enable students to read social cues, navigate social situations, communicate, negotiate and resolve conflict, advocate for oneself with adults and peers, and cooperate and work effectively in a team.
3. Emotional skills and competencies help students recognise and manage their emotions, understand the emotions and perspectives of others, cope with stress and demonstrate respect and empathy towards others.

There are numerous evidenced based curriculum social emotional learning programs that have been shown to reduce aggression in schools. Please refer to: www.casel.org. It would be important to

identify and promote programs in ACT schools that are suitable for the Australian school environment. There are not many Australian developed programs that have looked at measuring student outcomes eg reduced behavioural incidences or suspensions. Smiling Mind is an example of Australian program that has demonstrated improved behaviours amongst students (www.smilingmind.com.au). Note: Wellbeing EDvantage is a provider for Smiling Mind.

Explicit teaching of social, emotional and cognitive skills is consistent with the [ACT Future of Education Strategy](#) (2018) and the [OECD Learning Framework](#) (2018).

Train school leaders to understand how to improve and measure school climate and school identification.

School leaders need training in understanding what school climate is, how they can improve it and how they can monitor their school climate and other wellbeing measures. Professor Kate Reynolds from the ANU has been working on school climate for 10 years and her expertise in this area is unparalleled in Australia. Please refer to https://psychology.anu.edu.au/people/academics/prof-kate-reynolds#acton-tabs-link--tabs-person_tabs-middle-2.

Summary

Having an ecological understanding of aggression and violence in school ensures that all contributing factors to these issues are known. Understanding that school based factors can contribute to or reduce bullying and violence is important as often these factors are the only factors that school staff have any control over. It is not unusual for students and or families not to be open to receive support for difficulties. If they do accept support change is often slow and full of two steps forward and one step back. Supporting students and their families is important but the biggest changes will occur via addressing school based factors.