



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

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Ms Kate Harkins
Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Harkins

Inquiry into Management and Minimisation of Bullying and Violence in ACT Schools

Menslink supports young men aged between ten and twenty-five to deal with problems and issues in their lives through professional counselling and volunteer mentoring. We also run educational programs in schools focusing on help-seeking behaviour, anti-bullying and respectful non-violent and non-aggressive relationships.

Across our group and one:one support options, we directly support and interact with around nine hundred young men each year (growing at an average rate of over 30% per year) and over ten thousand in our large class presentation program.

We would like to make the following observations from our experience:

Of the 220 referrals made on our website so far this year by parents, agencies or young men themselves, 61% experienced violence, aggression or abuse at home, compared with 21% at school and 23% elsewhere.

There are overlaps with some young men experiencing violence in multiple locations and we have not separated out victims and perpetrators. However the fact remains, amongst our client base at least, violence *outside* schools is experienced at nearly four times the rate experienced within the school environment; unfortunately with the most likely place for it to occur being their own home.

Amongst this cohort, 53% reported psychological or emotional violence/aggression/abuse compared to 47% reporting physical abuse. Anecdotally, we note greater degrees of psychological abuse from peers (compared to physical assault) in our school-age client base, leveraging various technologies from SMS through to social media to taunt young men not only in school but across the community.

I draw the Committee's attention to the following blog piece I wrote last month which includes a few real life (and de-identified) examples from outside the school environment:

<https://menslink.org.au/violence-in-schools-a-community-response-is-needed/>

While the causes of bullying and violence have been well-researched and documented, we believe that both its prevalence and impact are amplified through both the media and social media.

The prevalence of aggression, violence and bullying is increased through social media in the following way. As young men (and young women) witness parents, peers and role models posting aggressive and disrespectful comments online or in video content, they are more likely to believe:

- “Everyone’s doing it” so therefore it must be acceptable and even expected; and
- “I can get away with it” as there do not seem to be consequences applied online.

Both beliefs encourage aggressive behaviour amongst young people; whether online or in person. This behaviour can become increasingly normalised when coupled with widespread violent content experienced in movies, online gaming or pornography (all used widely by young men in particular).

Social media also greatly amplifies the impact of bullying, by:

- extending its reach in terms of numbers (with potentially hundreds getting involved online in what might have otherwise been an isolated incident);
- eliminating “safe places” or times: aggressive or hurtful comments now follow a victim 24 hours a day seven days a week wherever they may be located – there are no “safe places” anymore; and
- ensuring (in many cases), that humiliating comments, images or videos are available for life – often publicly available and searchable for years to come (a “digital tattoo” that cannot be removed).

Recommendations for systems and policy approaches

Menslink believes that, while bullying and violence are mostly experienced outside of schools and, noting they are not new phenomena, the government can take steps to both reduce the impact on victims and reduce the incidence of bullying and violence.

In the longer term, a cultural shift to an environment where aggression and violence (particularly against timid, smaller or weaker people) are perceived as “uncool” is critical, yet very difficult to achieve. That said, society made smoking uncool in less than thirty years, so it is not an impossible task. Making violence uncool is certainly a Menslink goal – at school, in the family and in the community.

Not surprisingly, we have noticed schools with a strong community and a partnership approach with parents tend to have fewer issues than schools where there is a more adversarial approach. Schools may need to take a stronger leadership approach to this to assist families experiencing challenges with the school, other students and even other parents. Well-being advocates, working closely with but independently of the school may assist principals and parents alike work more collaboratively in resolving issues and achieving a more positive school community.

Advertising this approach (through traditional and social media) could also be a way of promoting positive behaviours in people who would not normally engage with schools on a regular basis.

The Committee may like to review the concepts behind the *Broken Windows* approach to crime and anti-social behaviour reduction; particularly as documented in Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Tipping Point” (which also documents the reduction in teenage smoking). Of course, this approach needs careful design and planning to ensure it *builds* communities and does not become overly punitive.

The government could consider whether something like the “*Report It to Sort It*” SMS system used in football stadiums might be used to alert schools and/or community spaces to potential or developing situations. Again this requires significant design – particularly with resourcing to ensure problems are able to be monitored or averted in real time.

In the short term, Menslink is more than willing to continue to provide young men with counselling and group programs – both to assist victims in dealing with the impact of violence and bullying and also to assist users of violence (often victims themselves) in developing peaceful and respectful strategies in dealing with others.

Finally, Menslink strongly recommends that the ACT Government works with its COAG counterparts to develop national regulations governing social media platforms. At present, no Australian citizen (including minors) has a legal right or recourse to remove harmful, derogatory or damaging content about themselves – content that is available permanently in the public domain.

We have direct experience of young people posting damaging content – including some young people setting up an Instagram account dedicated to hurtful content about a particular young man – that cannot be removed. Social media providers advise the victim to block content, but that does not remove it from public circulation, where it is freely available to current and future peers, employers, partners, family and others.

We recommend national regulation to force social media companies to:

- Take a more proactive approach to banning, hiding or at least de-emphasising hateful speech, particularly involving minors; and
- Give individuals the right to remove or hide content that is harmful or demeaning to them.

We would of course be happy to provide additional or further explanatory information to the Standing Committee at any time.

Yours faithfully



Martin Fisk
Chief Executive Officer