

# WELLBEING AT SCHOOL: BUILDING A SAFE AND CARING SCHOOL CLIMATE

Every day, children come home from school sharing the highs and lows of their school day. When they communicate hurt or upset, it is easy to become instantly alarmed and reactionary. Most parents and caregivers handle their children's upset in an appropriate and educative way. When this is done, children learn social and emotional resilience and the importance of communicating their concerns to trusted adults who provide comfort, care and support. They will also learn valuable skills.



Although well-intentioned, some parents respond inappropriately to the concerns that their children raise. The behaviour of a highly emotional parent can have an even bigger impact for the child than the actual situation that caused the original upset. This brochure will provide some guiding principles that that parents and caregivers should consider as they make decisions about how to handle school based matters that their children have raised.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

To a certain extent, disagreements among peers can be a normal part of child development. When children fight, they might say and do mean things to each other because they do not know a more appropriate way of having their needs met. Developmentally appropriate fighting typically involves an equal balance in power between the conflicting parties with no deliberate intent to harm. Bullying, on the other hand, is very different to fighting. When a child is being bullied, the following three criteria must all be met:

- an imbalance of power exists
- abuse is repeated
- there is deliberate intention to harm either physically, socially and/or emotionally/psychologically

When your child reports a hurtful incident at school, parents need to be careful not to allege bullying before they consider if the conflict is normal fighting between peers. However, as a parent or caregiver, it's important to look-out for

potential warning signs of significant harm to your child, which might include any of the following:

- Fear of coming to school
- Regressive behaviour (e.g. bed wetting, increases in tantrums, more clingy than usual)
- Increased irritability (in the absence of normal development stages e.g. early adolescence)
- Changes to academic performance – sharp down turn in results (poorer grades, poor motivation to learn) or upturn (obsessive about school work to avoid dealing with emotions or due to fear of failure)
- Changes in mood and functioning (e.g., becoming withdrawn, changes in sleeping/eating patterns, oversensitivity, excessive attention seeking).

***If ever you suspect significant and detrimental harm to your child, it is essential that you contact the principal and/or classroom teacher immediately.***

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As a general guide, the following should be considered when you are dealing with your child's complaint or concern about something that has happened at school:

- 1. When a concern arises at school, the school should notify you about it.** If you have not been informed of the event or incident by school personnel, it is likely that they are unaware of what has happened. If this is the case, it is a good idea to let the class room teacher know about it so they can monitor the situation and follow up with the students as required.
- 2. Always remember that there is more than one side to any story.** Your child will share with you their view of what has happened. To them, it is very real and 100% true. But there will be many other versions or views as reported by other children involved in the same situation. Please remember this when your child shares their view of what has happened.
- 3. Children will sometimes edit their stories (consciously or unconsciously).** This can be a normal defense mechanism. However, as parents and caregivers it is important to remember that all children play a role in the dynamics of friendship groups. We need to remember this before judging, labelling or singling out other students as the "problem".
- 4. Avoid acting or reacting to a situation when you are in a highly emotional state.** When emotional, our rational or logical brain does not work effectively. We do not problem solve well and our judgement is significantly impaired. High levels of emotional distress result in low levels of rational problem solving. So talk the matter through with your child but then sleep on it overnight so that you both have an opportunity to calm down and decide on the best course of action.
- 5. Children can be very resilient.** Depending on the nature and severity of the issue, the matter can blow over very quickly – especially with parental/caregiver support. Focus on building up your child's mental health and social skills and resist the urge to phone or visit the parent of the other child.
- 6. Ask yourself, what am I really upset about?** When children come home with stories from their school day, we can react emotionally because we have unresolved experiences from our own schooling and/or day-to-day life. Take a moment to reflect on your own emotional experience before acting to ensure you are responding appropriately to the situation at-hand. Remember that emotions drive behaviour so choose behaviour when you are in a calm and rationale state.
- 7. When your child communicates a school concern, try to not do all the talking, advising, lecturing and sharing.** Use the following three step communication strategy:
  - Initially, just listen and reflect back what you are hearing and seeing. For example, "I can see by those big tears that this has really been a tough day for you." When you reflect well, your child will keep talking and sharing as they won't feel judged.
  - When they share more of their story, try to validate their experience, even if they have done things that you don't agree with. For example, just say "well I can see why you might have thought that was helpful." one way to solve the problem." You are not actually agreeing with your child but your child will get the sense that you are listening and understanding their situation.
  - Try some empathic statements to help get your child to their real feelings. Throw in some statements like, "If that happened to me, I would be so mad. Do you feel mad too?" Once you have moved the child from venting to connecting with their true feelings, they will feel listened to, validated and understood and will be very receptive to your advice. Continue to work together to problem-solve the situation and decide on a course of action.

For further information or support, please contact the school directly. Alternatively, there are a variety of external support options available to you and your family:

Kids Helpline Website: [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) PH: 1800 551 800

Lifeline PH: 131 114

Parentline Website: [www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au) PH: 1300 301 300

Family and Child Connect Website: [www.familychildconnect.org.au](http://www.familychildconnect.org.au) PH: 13 32 64

