

**“I’ve been made fun of ever since I can remember and they still do it today. Yah I’ve gotten bigger, but it still makes me mad when they do that. See, I don’t make fun of anybody. I tease people. I don’t really make fun of them about their learning habits cause I know how it feels to be put down a lot and I don’t like that”.**

(Lovitt, Plavins & Cushing, (1999)

## HOW CAN WE COMBAT BULLYING AT SCHOOL?

A comprehensive British study *The Life of a Disabled Child*, found the 300 participants had one thing in common. *“We all get picked on”.*

(Watson et al., 2000, p. 13)

“Picking on” included exclusion from peer groups, being called names, being hit or kicked, and having property taken or damaged. In a New Zealand study, nine out of the eleven students with disabilities interviewed described being bullied when asked about their experiences at school.

(MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001)

# Bullying



All of the stories and research presented here illustrate the importance of listening to the student's experiences and ideas about bullying in their school.



One of the most powerful messages teachers can send students is to always model respectful interactions through their actions, tone of voice, words and non verbal gestures. Teachers' attitudes are central to the task of supporting students' relationships with each other.

(McCay & Keyes, 2002)

**What happens in your school?**

Students with and without disabilities were interviewed about a bullying incident in their playground. Some of the non disabled students were upset with their classmates who were teasing, isolating and name calling the students with disabilities, but they seemed reluctant to act on this. In the case of one peer with disabilities the students rationalised this by saying that doing something would only make things worse for their bullied classmate. They were also afraid it would affect their status in the classroom. Teachers were unaware of the bullying and isolation of the student, and the student herself appeared to hide these effects at school, which may have been her way of resisting what she was experiencing. When the children were asked what should be done, the students said there should be more *“support from teachers”* to teach everybody how to *“deal”* with the students with disabilities so that *“people”* wouldn't tease them so much.

(Allan, 1997)



“Becky, well we’re not so sure about Becky’s behaviour. ‘Em like **whether it’s appropriate**, if you know what I mean. She gets bullied but we’re not sure if it really is bullying because **she seems to like getting the attention**, eh so she does things to the boys and they don’t like it so they react, so last week **she got coke poured on her to calm her down**”.

(Davis & Watson, 2001, p. 675)


Becky’s teacher was not able to see the boys’ role in bullying Becky, instead it was assumed that it was some characteristic of Becky’s, or her disability that caused her to be bullied and he recommended that Becky be referred to an educational psychologist for conflict management strategies. The boys’ behaviour went unquestioned in this school. Becky did not make the same mistake, and saw the boys’ behaviour as unacceptable.

(Davis & Watson, 2001, p. 675)



Research shows that bullying is often not well understood by adults in schools. They do not know when bullying is occurring, they do not respond to reports of bullying, or they are not available when bullying needs reporting.

(Kavermann, 1998; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001)



Children and parents describe structural arrangements in the school or classroom that highlight difference, as one thing that contributes to students being seen as different and bullied. A student described how he had spent his days flicking through library books ignored in the classroom. This, his parents felt, had identified him as obviously different and had resulted in bullying by his peers. (MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001)

**“The head teachers should go to them and tell them to stop it or if they don’t, they’d get excluded for it”.**

(Davis & Watson, 2001, p. 675)



#### To engage student support

This school intervention strategy was developed to help increase the social opportunities of two children with disabilities. The focus of the intervention was to promote caring and friendliness towards other students through the formal teaching lessons outlined below. Teachers who worked with the intervention described it as highly successful.

1. **Hero’s care:** An activity aimed at broadening students’ definition of caring to include caring for classmates as an heroic attribute.
2. **Puncturing negative peer pressure:** An activity designed to promote positive peer pressure and to anticipate negative peer pressure. When students are negative towards non disabled students who are friendly with students with disabilities, discrimination and prejudice are likely to grow.
3. **The need to belong:** Role plays were used as a vehicle for children to explore ideas and feelings about belonging.
4. **Good deeds and bad deeds:** This activity was aimed at teaching children to discriminate between good deeds and bad deeds shown towards their schoolmates, and to encourage students to reflect caring by doing good deeds.
5. **Knowledge building and skill development:** Discussions were focused on the students with disabilities to help non disabled students understand their two classmates and to communicate more effectively with them.

(Cooper, Griffith & Filer, 2003)



The research strongly suggests that students’ social relationships at school will be supported when there are changes at the level of the classroom, but most importantly, when there are systemic changes which focus on the school as a caring community.

(Allan, 2003; Grenot-Sheyer, Fisher & Staub, 2001; Staub, 1998)