**Bullying and your teenager**

The National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence is held annually in March. It is Australia’s key prevention initiative connecting schools and communities to find workable solutions to prevent bullying. Schools throughout Australia mark the day.

**Announcer:**

This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

The National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence is a bullying prevention initiative, connecting schools and communities to find workable solutions to bullying and violence. Each year, schools around Australia mark the day to raise awareness and to stand against bullying and violence.

Today, Professor James Scott, a clinical child and youth psychiatrist, and the head of the Child and Youth Research Group at the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute in Queensland joins us to talk about bullying and teenagers. Thanks for joining me, James.

**Professor James Scott:**

Thanks, Virginia. No, it's great to be here.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Is bullying worse now than it was when we were teenagers? And what's the difference?

**Professor James Scott:**

Look, I don't think it's worse. I mean, I think anyone who experiences bullying, it's an appalling experience. And particularly for young people where friends and peers are so important. I don't think it's worse than what it was. I think it has changed though. And I think it's changed in these ways. I think that physical bullying is less common than it once was. I think that a lot of bullying that goes on is much more around relational bullying and verbal bullying. And the relational bullying in particular, we’re seeing a lot of. That's where young people are excluded by their peers or rumors are made about them. I think that's going on a lot more. We know that is very harmful to young people in terms of, it really hurts the way that young people feel about themselves, and their self-esteem and their sense of inclusion.

Of course, the other thing that's changed is the availability of the internet, and so cyber bullying is something which just wasn't there a generation ago. Cyber bullying on itself is not a particularly significant problem. The main issue of cyber bullying is it tends to be an extension of other forms of bullying. So, we now have students who are victimised at school with verbal and relational bullying in particular, and then when they get home, in a place which should be a place of safety, there's an extension over the internet where they continue to be bullied via cyber bullying. They're the main differences.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What are some of the signals that my teen might be getting bullied?

**Professor James Scott:**

Look, I think they're wide and varied. And, so some teens are very happy to come home and let their parents know that they're having problems with their peers, and some teens keep it very much to themselves and try to sort out themselves. The things which parents should look out for in terms of thinking about bullying, but also thinking about other mental health problems are any changes in behaviour that seem quite dramatic, I suppose. Very marked. I mean teenagers are always changing their behaviour so it's always a bit difficult to know. But if kids are looking excessively sad, if they're refusing to go to school, if they're coming home much more irritable and angry, these things are warning signs. If you notice that they're suddenly not spending time with peers, whereas they once were very social kids, they can be warning signs as well, a real dislike about going to school can be a warning sign.

So, they're nonspecific. Part of the difficulty is that for some young people, there's an enormous sense of shame about being bullied. There are some young people who will blame themselves, and it's very hard for these young people to disclose to their parents and to other there's that they're being the victims of bullying that, you know, there's sort of that they tend to blame themselves, some children, and that's where these students need some assistance and actually sharing what's going on for them. And being able to open up, try and find some solutions to make this situation better.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What are the first steps we should take to address bullying?

**Professor James Scott:**

Look, I think the first step is to have a discussion with your teenager, with your child, about what's going on for them. And to really take time to listen. I really want to emphasise that, take time to listen. I think when you hear that your child's hurt it's very easy to get upset. In fact, it's natural to get upset about it. And one of the barriers, one of the impediments for kids sharing what they're experiencing with their parents is that they're worried about how their parents are going to react. They're going to get upset, that they're going to make things worse or it's going, to go up to school such.

So, I think the first thing is to really sort of take the time and let the child sort of explain what's going on. And that might take several discussions. And really important that this conversation is supportive, non-judgmental, you don't have to provide solutions straight up. You might actually want to spend some time thinking about what's going on, but let the child know that you love them, that you care for them, that you're there for them. And that this will get sorted out. That's the first step.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

How do I start that conversation about bullying?

**Professor James Scott:**

What I find very helpful is asking your kids generally about how things are going, how are their friends going, how are they enjoying school, that sort of thing. Just to try to sort of give them the open space to talk about and to share things that they might be having struggles with. If that doesn't sort of yield any sort of information and you think something's going on, then you can say, "Look, I've noticed that you're not talking to John anymore. Is everything okay there? Have there been any issues?”. I think still letting them know, "Look, if you ever want to talk about this, I'm here to listen". If you know specifically that something's gone on, you hear from another parent that someone did something appalling to your child, then rather than asking, "Did this happen?" Because children often go on and back foot, "No, no, it didn't happen." And then you sort of get in this, did it, didn't it and such. That's very awkward.

I think a parent’s better to approach these situations, which are often uncomfortable for the child with look, I heard that today you were excluded from being invited to this party and that you were really upset about it. And I was hoping that we could just have a bit of a conversation about what was going on. That sounds like that was really difficult for you. So rather than sort of asking what has happened, letting the teenager know what you know, because they can sort of then sort of get on and share it. It's not, did this happen or didn't it. And then you’d get yes, no. I think that's a really effective way of sort of managing a whole range of problems that kids have where their first answer might be "No, that's not true," if you ask them. And then it's really hard to know where to go from here.

So, I think that there's some general tips about starting conversation, but the thing is, you can't talk about difficult things with kids if you don't have a relationship to start with. This goes back to one of our really important preventative strategies for all mental health problems in children and young people, you got to be working on a relationship the whole time. So when these things come up, the kids will come to you.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Can I protect my teenager from bullying?

**Professor James Scott:**

Gosh, wouldn't it be good if we could protect our kids from all sorts of problems? The short answer is no, the long answer is maybe. So, one of the things which I think has happened more and more in our society is that as parents are trying to protect their kids from all sorts of harms and problems and difficulties and distresses, and there's a lot of people who suspect that makes our kids less resilient. Particularly when they become older adolescents and young adults, and you can definitely not protect them at that stage. They got to face up to it. So I think that, no, you can't protect your kids from being bullied necessarily, but you can do some things so that they're going to be better able to manage difficult peer situations. And that might prevent it from going on to bullying.

And this gets back to having really good relationships with kids, having open discussions with them about how to manage sort of difficult situations. And it's not about telling them what to do so much as. I think a really useful technique is sort of sharing with your kids stories about what you've experienced, what you know others experienced and what worked and what didn't work and such. This is all sort of incidental learning for kids and they can take it on board and apply it themselves. So I think that what parents can do is provide this strong foundation in which they raise children. And that is protective against the whole range of challenges in life, including bullying.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks. That sounds like great advice. What is the best way of addressing concerns with the school?

**Professor James Scott:**

First and foremost, with a cool head. I think that's a really vexing issue actually. The first question is, whether or not your child wants you to or not, and the second issue is how do you go about doing it? There are times, and I think parents need to take charge and override the wishes of their children and just go do it. Kids almost always say, I don't want you to say the teacher or make it worse. And I think as a parent, you need to be very careful about letting your young child, your young adolescent, be in charge of what's a very, very difficult situation. They don't have wisdom sometimes to know how best to negotiate things.

So, let's assume you make the decision you are going to go up and address the school. You got to think about who's the best person to talk to in the school and often the school have policies about how to manage bullying. It's worth having a look at that first to see. And then going up and having a discussion, be really clear about what your concerns are. As a parent you don't have a right to tell schools how they should deal with the other student. In my experience, schools are very variable and how well they manage it. And that's one of the challenges. But what you're hoping to do is to provide the schools with all the information so they can take it into account. I find schools give much better responses when they're getting information in a, I suppose, as much information as possible, and it's delivered in the manner of as unemotive as one can so they can work out how to deal with it. And then you got to give the school time, because it takes them time to sort through and work out what's going on. Arranging for a follow-up meeting to sort of see what's happened and such, is really important. And keeping your child informed as to what you're doing. I think is also really important, even though they might ask you not to. I think it's better to sort say, "Look actually I'm really worried about this situation. I think it's too big for you to manage. And I am going to go and speak to Mrs Smith and have a bit of a talk about what we can best do". Sometimes taking the child along is a good idea if they want to go along, at least that way they know what's being said and have some control of things. Some kids don't want to.

I've answered that saying, laying out some of the things to think through. It's not easy, but I think the thing you don't want really knee-jerk reactions to any of this. You want a strategy to be thought through carefully so that you can get the best outcome for your child so they can be safe at school.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

It's difficult though, isn't it? Because it is an emotive issue when your child's concerned.

**Professor James Scott:**

It's enormously emotive. And I think for that reason, it's often best not to go out that day when you hear about this, sort of talk with school, better to sort of give it a little bit of time. I think talking with a friend, sometimes taking someone up with you to talk is really important. Most of the schools are getting very good at responding to bullying. They've got processes in place which weren't there 10 years ago, and they're getting very good at it. And there's lots of information available to schools about how to manage it as well. These are guidelines, but it is hard and it's really difficult. And what you're wanting is to just get the best outcome for your child.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

When should I seek professional assistance for my child?

**Professor James Scott:**

I think that professional assistance is really important if the bullying is persisting. I think sort of having a professional, like a mental health professional or GP in your corner to give advice is really helpful where the bullying's persisting. Or I think in situations where your child has ongoing problems with their mood or their anxiety levels, or that schoolwork's really declining or they're refusing to go to school. I think they're big warning signs. And bullying will make every child sad. And what you hope is that over a week or two, once the bullying's been addressed, that goes away. And it usually does but if those emotional problems are persisting, that's probably when you need to get help.

In all these responses what I'm trying to do is just get that element of, okay, please don't be too reactive, try or just step it through. But I also know it’s really hard as a parent, I've been there with my kids and such. It requires a lot of sort of thoughtful consideration as to how to sort of convey the seriousness of a situation in a way that's going to lead to a constructive outcome.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

It's hard because it's your child, but even if you're the parent that thinks, okay, I'm going to take this slowly, I'm going to be considered in my outcome. You don't know that the other parents involved are going to be that way. So you're not only dealing with you and your child, you're dealing with another child and other parents. So it is difficult.

**Professor James Scott:**

Yeah, it is. It is. And we know there's a proportion of kids who are both victimised, but they also perpetrate bullying themselves. And so one's child might have a degree of involvement and they might need to modify their behavior too. And so, as a parent, that's why I think always better to sort of go up explaining what one's seeing and finding out, kind of, a bit more about what's going on.

There's some situations where kids are appallingly just victimised. There's just no excuses for it. There's other situations where I've seen parents march up and threaten the school and the kids and all this. And then they find out actually their kids are up to all sorts of mischief themselves and that's difficult to come back from in that situation. It's not helpful. So, I think one's best to sort of tread carefully. I suppose as we are having a professional role it is good. Because you can sort of get that advice, but you don't want to sort of wait until you can get in to see a professional to do something.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Yeah.

**Professor James Scott:**

It's tricky. It's really tricky. And I think the other thing is a lot of the bullying that goes on with the relational bullying, actually very hard for schools to spot. It's very hard, it just kind of goes unnoticed. I think with the relational issues, it's actually harder to address and harder for schools to manage.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks for your time, James, and thanks for all that insight.

**Professor James Scott:**

Yeah. Very pleased to share the suggestions and I hope what I've conveyed is this is a serious issue. Every child has right to be safe at school, and parents have a very important role in ensuring their children do well in the school environment. Thanks so much, Virginia.

**Announcer:**

You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education Podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.