

Good behaviour bonds

A chalkboard with a drawing of a smiling face and a hand resting on a shoulder. The drawing is done in white chalk on a dark green chalkboard. The face is smiling and has a large, open mouth. The hand is resting on the shoulder of a person wearing a grey sweater. The background of the chalkboard is dark green.

As reports of the bullying and harassment of teachers continue to make headlines around the country, journalist Jessica Willis reports on what measures are needed to ensure parents and students are supporting teachers, not abusing them.

Today, teachers are 8.4 times more likely to experience violence than the average Australian, causing exponential increases in stress and anxiety.

Marcela Slepica, Director of Clinical Services at AccessEAP, a psychology organisation which supports and develops positive organisational behaviour, said that over the past five years there has been a 36% increase in the number of teachers seeking support from their counsellors.

"There are many more pressures on today's teachers, including increasingly demanding or aggressive parents and escalating levels of classroom violence," Slepica said.

"This behaviour is unacceptable and there are severe impacts for teachers' wellbeing when they are unsupported.

"If there isn't support at a school level and teachers are expected to manage bullying and harassment alone - it starts to be on their mind constantly and wears them down.

"If the harassment continues it can start a spiral of self doubt and anxiety.

"Teachers start to blame themselves for not being able to resolve things and it can lead to mental health issues.

"That is a cost to our community as well, because if a teacher leaves the profession, there are other knock-on costs and implications.

"This is a community wide issue that needs to be resolved together, not just left to teachers."

Latest research

In April 2019, researchers from La Trobe University published *Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment by Students and Parents: Report from an Australian Exploratory Survey*.

The project analysed teachers' experiences of feeling bullied and victimised while working in Australia's independent and public schools and presented findings on the incidence and impact of Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment (TTBH).

The report found overwhelming evidence of teachers with ongoing incidences of student and parental TTBH.

According to the report, "TTBH by students and parents has detrimental effects on a teacher's sense of self-efficacy and wellbeing and may contribute to an unsafe workplace".

Lack of acknowledgement

While evidence suggests that there are disturbingly high incidences of student and parental TTBH, the negative impacts on teacher safety and wellbeing are largely unacknowledged across Australia.

The La Trobe study is believed to be the first of its kind in Australia, with the researchers finding scarce academic studies, government reports, policies and media items focusing on teacher safety.

This is problematic as it perpetuates the traditional pedagogical narrative wherein teachers are portrayed as being in a position of power and therefore more likely to be instigators of bullying rather than victims.

However, contrary to popular belief, evidence suggests teachers often feel powerless in the classroom and parental and student TTBH is a common daily occurrence.

"Australian cultural attitudes and public discourse resist identifying certain student behaviour as having an adverse impact on teachers and problematic behaviours are contextualised in terms of teachers' ability (or lack thereof) to manage increasingly complicated classrooms," the report read.

"...while teachers are vulnerable to frequent episodes of bullying and harassment... they also feel compromised by reporting such incidents.

"Many teachers feel their professional capacity may be questioned if they disclose occurrences of TTBH."

Good behaviour modelling

"Teachers play a vital role in the community and we collectively need to support them so that they can do their job," said Slepica.



“Teachers start to blame themselves for not being able to resolve things and it can lead to mental health issues.”

“This starts with parents modelling good behaviours and supporting teachers’ roles.”

After a recent investigation, *The Age’s Good Weekend Magazine* reported situations which would be well known to many teachers.

Journalists Melissa Fyfe and Henrietta Cook wrote, “Parents are staging sit-ins, hatching coup-like plots to topple principals, and tailgating educators in the car park.

“There are parents who undermine through gossip, often online, others with threats of legal action.

“And some are persistent, vexatious complainers, who pen 10-page emails with more capital letters and exclamation marks than Donald Trump’s Twitter feed.”

This behaviour is unacceptable and often occurs in the presence of students who then adopt this behaviour themselves.

Members take action

Our Union recognises that targeted bullying and harassment extends to both teaching and non teaching staff.

One of the most significant supports for staff is knowing that their school has a clear policy outlining acceptable and unacceptable approaches to resolution of conflicts, concerns or criticisms and these work best when they are frequently and consistently reinforced to the whole school community.

Staff should be able to consult on and contribute to any policy under review.

Strategies to prevent abuse can also include schools setting clear communication boundaries; such as ensuring all parent-teacher communications are arranged by appointment with an identified agenda and reasonable preparation time.

Any meetings should always be on school grounds and within hours of duty.

If school staff are subjected to parental abuse, as a first line of action, the seriousness of the parent’s conduct can either be explained to them by a member of school leadership, or via formal letter from the school.

In cases involving assault, attempted assault and threats of assault it is important to note that these constitute criminal offences and staff can make a complaint to police officers, requesting they initiate proceedings to prosecute the parent for assault.

In Queensland, this is also applicable for children who are 10 years or older.

In the case of students, staff have a duty of care to ensure they have taken all reasonable steps to manage student behaviour within the school’s behaviour management framework.

At times, employers may attempt to place responsibility for student behaviour on the staff member rather than focusing on their responsibility to provide a safe workplace and this is unacceptable.

If you are unsure or uncomfortable with an employer’s response to student or parents’ behaviour, contact our Union immediately.

Key points:

- All staff working in a school generally come across problematic student behaviour that requires a response.
- Abuse of teachers and non teaching staff by parents or others is unacceptable.
- Your employer is obliged to assist you in dealing with problematic parental and student behaviours.
- Be aware of your duty of care towards students and your employer’s duty of care to you.
- Be aware of your school’s policies and procedures for communication with parents. In cases involving assault, you may make a complaint to police.
- Make contact with your Union for further advice and support.

References:

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/the-new-school-bullies-aren-t-children-they-re-parents-20190416-p51ej1.html>
Billett, Paulina & Fogelgarn, Rochelle & Burns, Edgar. (2019). *Teacher Targeted Bullying and Harassment by Students and Parents: Report from an Australian Exploratory Survey*