

21 October 2010

Dear Parents

BULLYING

One of the most distressing things for a parent to hear is that their child is being bullied at school. The thought of other children deliberately hurting one's child is always disturbing. The average parent wants to rush to school and sort out the guilty children him or herself or telephone the parents concerned and tell them to sort out the bullying immediately. Both courses of action are normally disastrous though so instead a parent feels anxious, disempowered and often unclear about what to do next.

This is of course exactly how the bullied child feels and is the desired outcome of the bully's actions. We can worry that doing anything about it could make matters worse, which is just what the bullied child feels. Bullied children are so often rendered helpless, convinced that both the school and family can do nothing for them, and therefore just put up with it, becoming increasingly dejected and unhappy at school.

Sometimes staff are told that they do nothing about bullying: "What is the point of having a bullying policy when bullying still continues?" I need to make it clear therefore that bullies will always exist, that there has always been bullying at schools and there always will be. One finds adult bullies in politics, the corporate world, families, in fact, the potential exists for bullying in any social dynamic. The issue is not that there is bullying but whether something will be done about bullying when it is reported or discovered and whether or not the intervention will be successful.

We do have a policy and I believe it works, not in preventing any bullying from taking place at the school, but in providing a process to be followed and in sending out a clear message that bullying is not acceptable; that reports of it will be dealt with carefully and the process followed through to an appropriate and positive conclusion. Our bullying policy is attached – it also appears every year in the Prep Information Booklet. It is elaborated on during Life Orientation lessons on an annual basis as well. Assembly talks also often focus on respect for one another, bullying, friendship, empathy and so on.

How do parents and the school then deal with reports of bullying?

inspires individuals

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Ensure bullying has taken place

Bullying is persistent and deliberate hurtful behaviour of a physical, verbal or emotional nature or a combination of all three. Physical bullying is rare, much more common nowadays is the verbal (constant name calling, putting down, taunting) or emotional (rumour spreading, exclusion, open rejection by a group). Bullying is not the occasional hurtful comment or a teasing remark that is not well received. Nor is pushing in lines or a fight between boys. The above all have to be dealt within the context in which they happened.

Bullying is ongoing – hence the effect. At times there are different perceptions of what constitutes bullying and what has actually happened, particularly between the school and parents, and this has to be worked through.

Report bullying

Bullying can be reported to any teacher, the counsellor, a Housemaster or myself. It tends to be reported by a boy himself, his friends, parents or can be witnessed by a teacher. Unfortunately the last does not often happen as bullying tends to be carefully hidden from adults. Parents will not always report bullying if they do not have the permission of their children to do so. This is a personal choice but I think adults have to make the decision. The fear a boy has of reporting bullying is exactly the effect the bully desires or relies on. One has to break the cycle and it can be difficult, scary and emotional for those involved.

Also important is specific information: names, incidents, comments, etc. This information makes it much more straightforward and clear cut to deal with.

What does the school do?

We always try to bring all the boys together after the teacher has met and discussed the issue carefully with the boy being bullied. There is a clear understanding that the bully will not be punished for this but have a chance to learn from it and behave differently from thereon. This enables reporting and conflict resolution to take place without the bullied boy feeling he will be responsible for the bully's punishment and gives some opportunity for the bully to learn from mistakes, see himself as others do and become the best he can be.

Where bullying behaviour persists after this or where other boys have been bullied by the same person, the bully will be punished. The consequences can be quite severe from internal social suspension to withdrawal of privileges such as attending a camp. The boy's parents would also be involved at this stage.

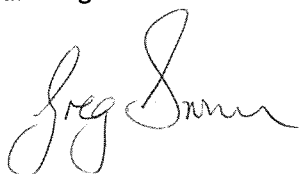
School is an enormously socialising experience. It is a safe place to learn and there has to be some pain, some tough learning situations, what Cecil Day Lewis calls in his poem, *Walking Away*, "the small, the scorching ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay". Friendships change as does achievement in different areas. There are disagreements, misunderstandings, learning to be part of a group and discovering that one is not the centre of the world and cannot be the centre of attention at all times. This is often a difficult path as boy's peers are not the concerned adults the small child has been used to. The boys all want attention, all want a chance and will not all get it in the same way at the same time. The bully will triumph if not confronted, if not dealt with and if not given other ways to be; and the bully's "victim" also has to be empowered through the process and learn how best to manage such situations in the future.

I have seen considerable success with our bullying policy here and with similar practices at other schools. Boys who have been intimidated grow stronger and taller, groups turn to something much more positive than humiliating a fellow pupil and many bullies move on, finding better ways to be respected by their peers and better ways to interact with others. School is a learning experience ultimately.

Housemasters keep a careful watch on any behaviour that amounts to bullying. Sometimes when we suspect bullying is going on but nothing tangible is emerging we have used confidential questionnaires for the boys to fill in and then acted on the information. We are determined that boys should be able to feel safe and happy at school so we teach boys that bullying is completely unacceptable behaviour and when it does occur deal with it carefully and with the appropriate consequences. In a dynamic social environment no amount of teaching or censure fully prevents certain behaviours taking place: the crucial issue is what is done when it has clearly taken place.

I hope that these thoughts on the issue of bullying and a brief summation of the school's approach are of use to you and provide some food for thought as well as reassurance of our commitment to addressing the problem of bullying.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Greg Brown'.

GREG BROWN
HEADMASTER