Friendly Schools and Families - A Bullying Reduction Program for Schools

Foreword

Bullying touches almost everyone’s life, it is widespread and harmful - but it is also preventable. As we learn more about its lasting effects, it is becoming an issue of growing concern to practitioners, parents and researchers worldwide. Every one of us has the right to feel safe, secure, accepted and valued and the responsibility to take action to ensure others feel the same.

For these reasons the Friendly Schools & Families Program is very timely. It provides individual, group, family and school community level actions to address and prevent bullying in its social context. The Program assists with the design, development, implementation, dissemination and evaluation of a social skill building and comprehensive anti-bullying program.

The Friendly Schools & Families Program offers practical guidance, a plethora of strategies for each component of a Whole-school Program (including ethos, policy and practice, physical environment, social environment, engaging families, learning environments and behaviour management) and tools to assist with their implementation, as well as case studies to demonstrate how other schools have tailored and used these strategies. The Program challenges and encourages schools to examine how their organisation, ethos, learning environments and responses to bullying inhibit this behaviour and enhance social skills.

The Friendly Schools & Families Program is an evidence based program that suggests that when implemented as a whole – bullying can be effectively tackled. This Program will greatly assist schools with the process.

Development of the Program

The Friendly Schools research has been recognised nationally and internationally as a successful evidenced-based bullying prevention program. This Program comprises whole-school (including family) learning and teaching strategies, resources and case studies from Australian schools. The comprehensive whole-school program, designed to maximise family involvement, has been found to significantly reduce bullying within the school setting.

The Friendly Schools & Families Program is based on six years of detailed scientific research involving over 6000 school students, and their parents and teachers. It is one of the few evidence-based programs that has been rigorously evaluated and found to improve young people’s social skills and to reduce bullying behaviour.

In 1999 a formative research project aimed to develop and comprehensively evaluate a set of evidence-based Principles for Success and exemplar case studies, to guide the development of a whole-school approach to reduce bullying. A four-year intervention research project, Friendly Schools (FS), was then implemented in 29 randomly selected Perth metropolitan primary schools (2000-2003) to evaluate the best whole-school strategies to reducing bullying. Perth is the major city in the state of Western
Australia. Using the results from the FS Project, a second more targeted program which included a stronger focus on capacity building and involving families was developed. This three year research project called Friendly Schools Friendly Families (FSFF), involved 20 randomly selected primary schools (2002-2004).

This research has shown a very significant reduction in bullying behaviour, greater feelings of safety and happiness at school and an increase in social skills among children who received the Program compared to those who did not receive the Program. This research has also helped to identify the Program components that resulted in the greatest reduction of bullying. These components form the basis of the new Friendly Schools & Families Program, and are supported by case studies from schools that have implemented these materials.

Based on our Principles for Success to Reduce Bullying in Schools, the Friendly Schools & Families Program aims to reduce bullying in schools as well as build schools' capacity to systematically respond to bullying and to empower teachers, parents and students to prevent or to cope more effectively with these situations. This universal intervention provides a variety of Whole-school Strategies based on the Health Promoting Schools Model to increase awareness and understanding of bullying; increase communication about bullying; promote adaptive responses to bullying; promote peer and adult support for students who are bullied; and promote peer as well as adult discouragement of bullying behaviour.

The Program also addresses evidence suggesting that the development of resilience, positive self-esteem, empathy, cooperation, friendship skills, social skills and decision making, emotional management and conflict resolution can help protect people from the harmful effects of bullying, as well as help them build positive peer relationships.

The Friendly Schools research shows prevention programs that involve the whole-school community are more likely to reduce bullying. The Friendly Schools & Families Program brings together the whole-school community by providing training and support for teaching and non-teaching staff, students, families and community members. All members of the school community can contribute to the development and maintenance of a friendly and safe school culture.
Principles for Success

The Principles for Success in bullying reduction in schools were derived from a synthesis of recently published evidence and international expert opinion. A formative study comprised four systematic phases of information and data collection to compile and then validate a comprehensive summary of evidence to help schools assess, select or develop and implement whole-school strategies to reduce bullying.

This process of gathering evidence from the literature and schools, and systematically validating it with expert researchers’ and practitioners’ opinion has contributed to a manual of successful practice principles that has been evaluated and used by the Friendly Schools & Families Program to guide policy and practice for bullying reduction in schools. To empirically assess its effectiveness, these guidelines were used and tested as part of two comprehensive randomised group trials, called the Friendly Schools and the Friendly Schools Friendly Families Research Projects.

The Principles for Success were organised into a framework, across six inter-related components based on the World Health Organisation (WHO) Health Promoting Schools Model. These components included Policy and Practice, Social Environment, Student Support, Family Links, Classroom Practice and Physical Environment. Each of these components are represented in the Friendly School & Families Program as a Whole-school Component Handbook.

The Friendly Schools Research Project found that to be effective in practice, these components need to be integrated in a coordinated manner, such that action in one component effects change in other components.

The Friendly Schools & Families Whole-school Program aims to help school communities enhance their skills, knowledge and capacity to implement an evidence-based whole-school approach to the prevention and reduction of bullying. It also helps schools to engage families in this process.
Who would use this program?

The Friendly Schools and Families Program is designed to help all members of the school community including teachers, school administrators, students and parents. The program is best coordinated by a representative whole-school committee ideally involving the Principal.

Many schools have already begun to take whole-school action to address bullying. For these schools, this program provides the opportunity to review action, identify areas that may require further attention and to engage in evidence based activities that will maintain or enhance current school efforts in this area.

For schools that have not yet taken action, this program provides guidance for developing and engaging in a whole-school response to bullying.

International Application

One of the great advantages of the program is that it is applicable to all communities worldwide. The psychological and social impact of bullying is common in all countries despite variance in the form it takes or methods applied in different cultures. This program, while developed at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia and trialled in that state will be of interest to many countries.

The Friendly Schools and Families program is currently being trialled in Harlem, New York (USA) and the results will be collated by the end of 2007.