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Opening Statement on Bullying and Exclusion

In my clinical experience about 80% of the children who attend my service have some significant experience of what they describe as 'bullying' and this would appear to be a considerable contribution to their current mental health difficulties.

Self-worth, self-belief and self-value are cornerstones to our mental wellbeing and it is my view the bullying is the leading cause of eroding these qualities in a child and therefore is a significant contributor to the mental health problems in children in Ireland.

There are some important distinctions to be made about what is bullying.

What some children describe as 'bullying' can be more accurately described as robust banter. If we over dilute the term I fear it will lose its significance and I believe language is an important player in the management of this dynamic.

The key differentiation in this for me is intent.

Childhood is a mixed bag of interactions of personality, with robust children who are maybe the youngest of 4 children, are used to and enjoy the rough and tumble of physical engagement and engage with the world in that way.

These children also share a space with for example a more reserved sheltered child who has no desire for such antics and may indeed be hyper sensitive to these events in their environment.

 Therefore it comes down to the 'spirit' of the engagement, and the levels of knowledge and intent that all parties are aware of.

Childhood by its nature involves negotiating the social landscape and therefore mistakes and social errors or misjudgements will occur. For example, a child may be unaware of how their behaviour is

impacting on someone else, and they need to be given an opportunity to adjust their behaviour in accordance to this feedback.

However if this feedback is given and they knowingly persist with the hurtful behaviour and continue to harass, torment or persecute the other child. This cannot be tolerated.

It is my opinion that the most important element in predicting and managing bullying behaviour is 'culture'. A culture can hide harm in plain sight. The culture of a school, sports organisation or club is very influential to the behaviour of its attendees. We need to invest in meaningfully respectful cultures, and a poster at the entrance is not sufficient.

In the bullying triad there is the 'bully', the 'bullied' and the 'bystander', I think we underestimate the role and influence of the bystander. In order to cultivate culture we must work to positively convert the majority.

Contrary to popular belief, I do not feel that the answer lies in trying to make meek children more robust and it's not about teaching children to hit back. Instead it is about selling a culture of values and respect and stamping out a culture of avoidance, dismissal and tolerance.

The stories that have the greatest impact are the ones that prolong for years. It is not unusual for me to hear the story of a child and parent who report bullying incidents it to a teacher in senior infants. The response is that the class are 'spoken to as a group' and nothing changes. The child in question is then continually persecuted for the remaining 6 years. This has a devastating effect on their social and emotional development, their self-worth and mental wellbeing.

Bullying has many forms and guises, some more identifiable than others.

The overt name calling and physical hostilities are easier to name and manage.

However, for me our greatest challenge is the bullying that occurs in the form of exclusion.

With greater opportunity of exclusion and exclusiveness in the contemporary world, through social media etc, this has become a huge challenge in the mental health field.

The response to this is very complex. How do we instruct children to include or play with other children? How do we avoid micro managing childhood relationships?

This is as toxic and detrimental dynamic in the bullying problem, and is far more prevalent in my clinical caseload than the physical one, and yet it seems almost impossible to irradicate and under discussed.

Perhaps a move towards meaningful value systems is required, but in my view despite progress being made in the area of inclusion and embracing diversity, it has done little to stem this tide of exclusion and isolation. For me, this needs to be something we need to address.

In the meantime there will be a need to be more supports for children who are experiencing bullying and exclusion. The inclusion of therapeutically informed staff in schools might go some way to assist this challenge.

But for me the culture is the greatest ally. The culture involves a value system that reflects the seriousness of the issue and this culture will only work if it is developed by the students from the inside out as opposed to the outside in, and parents will have to be included and 'buy in' to the culture of the management of bullying and exclusion from the off.

Attending school or a sporting activity or a club, free from the fear of persecution, hostility or exclusion is not a luxury, it is a basic human right and one that we need to take seriously.