

28 April 2021

Ref: JCES-I-2021-[252]

**Opening statement for the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on “School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health”**

I am a psychotherapist and author who works in private practice in Co.Offaly. My work focuses on parenting, family dynamics and working with teenagers. Much of my counselling and writing focuses on mental health and I’m a [regular contributor to the media](#). My first book, [Cotton Wool Kids](#), was released in 2015 while [Bully-Proof Kids](#) was released in 2017 while my latest book [Fragile](#), was released in 2019. I hold a B.A. in Counselling and Psychotherapy and a M.A. in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and I’m currently studying for a PhD in Gender identity formation in children and adolescents.

I work in a private practice in the midlands in Ireland and of the three second-level schools in the area, one of the schools appears to handle bullying very effectively, another does reasonably well, while the third school encounters bullying on an almost continuous basis. This is remarkable as the kids are from mostly similar backgrounds. The difference is that the problem school minimises any bullying incidents, while the other two schools are, to a greater or lesser extent, willing to address the problem and take the necessary steps to deal with it. It is notable that schools that are more competitive and more focused on their students’ results in education than their emotional well-being tend to minimise bullying (O’Malley, 2017). Anti-bullying programmes show varying degrees of success and they are insufficient to change a culture of bullying within a school.

The research about bullying provides the resolution to this complex and chronic problem. It is estimated that 75% to 90% of kids don’t bully, the problem is that these kids are prepared to act as upstanders only 20% of the time (O’Malley, 2017). Dan Olweus, the Swedish expert on bullying, coined the phrase ‘if it’s mean, intervene’, and if we can convince kids to always intervene – to become upstanders – when they see bullying we can immediately reduce its frequency, intensity and its impact.

The role of adults in this context is to encourage the bystanders to act as upstanders and also, perhaps more idealistically, nurture potential bullies to be fair leaders.

Bystanders are the people who see everything but do nothing. Thousands of kids today are bystanders to cruel bullying. They let bullying happen in real life or online. The bystanders are the silent majority and yet they hold the majority of the power. It is estimated that bystanders are present in 90% of cases of bullying, and they can often stop the bullying within ten seconds if they choose to intervene, online or in real-life (O'Malley, 2017).

If we can create an environment where being a bystander means that we are complicit in the drama, then we will eliminate the safe position of the bystanders. Challenging bystanders to become 'upstanders' will change the culture of bullying to being perceived as an inevitable happening and instead as a preventable problem.

It is also helpful for schools to view bullying as an opportunity to teach schoolchildren how to behave in a more socialised manner. Children are often not yet fully socialised and their brains are not yet fully formed – the Robert Ardrey quote comes to mind “But we were born of risen apes not fallen angels” - and so they can gravitate towards the pack instinct easier than adults do. It is our job as the concerned adults to educate children so that bullying becomes less acceptable within the school culture.

Bullying can be significantly reduced however, to date, not enough people are currently educated about how to do this.

---

## References

O'Malley, S. (2017). *Bully-Proof Kids: Practical tools to help your child grow up confident, resilient and strong*. Gill Books