

## **School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health - Opening Statement**

Many thanks for your invitation to address the Committee on this very important issue.

While all schools are now obliged to have an anti-bullying policy, it requires continuous attention to ensure that school personnel are aware of the ever-increasing catalogue of ways in which bullying can occur, particularly cyber bullying. Where once the victim at least had the sanctuary of home when bullying might have occurred at school or elsewhere, now they are only a click away from those causing their discomfort and stress at any time, day or night.

Research by the DCU National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre reveals that cyber-bullying incidents have soared in number during lockdown.

Research has also shown that severe impact of bullying on the victim, their friends and family, those who witness the bullying, and even on the perpetrator. Physical or mental health issues can result, including social isolation, stress, anxiety, depression, even psychotic episodes and suicide. Physically, heart disease and other serious illness maybe the consequences of bullying.

While we usually think of bullying at school as being between children, it can happen at every other interface between people. School leaders can be bullied by staff members, or vice versa. Teachers, SNAs, ancillary staff and parents can be victims or perpetrators like anyone else. If unchecked, it can have a devastating effect on the well-being of those involved and on school morale in general.

IPPEN suggests a number of measures which will help to reduce the likelihood of bullying and its many consequences.

1. More support is needed for school leaders and Boards with HR and the development of an appropriate Dignity at Work policy.
2. Updated resources need to be available on cyber bullying, racist bullying, and homophobic/ transphobic/ gender-based bullying.
3. A policy to counter racism should be in every school - templates need to be developed to support schools with this.

4. A centrally-approved anti-bullying programme and appropriate CPD would benefit all schools.
5. A fully trained staff member is needed in each school, with allocated time as a behaviour support teacher, to provide support and guidance, and to liaise with external agencies.

Through IPPN's Leadership Support Service, since September 2017, we have advised on 25 cases of bullying amongst children and 29 adult/workplace/ grievance procedure type cases. School leaders are often left to deal with staff bullying problems which should be the remit of the Board or even the management body. Research carried out for IPPN and NAPD by Dr Philip Riley shows that school principals experience nearly twice the incidence of threats and actual physical violence at work than other population groups, with a higher incidence for female principals.

Where adult bullying occurs in schools, early access to counsellors to provide support would decrease the risk of escalation and exacerbation in the behaviour and its impact.

A Multi departmental approach is needed to strategically explore the development of multidisciplinary teams in and around schools to focus on bullying and other emotional needs of children, and to provide support for pupils and their families who experience socio-economic inequalities which may result in bullying.