

2009

Australian covert bullying prevalence study

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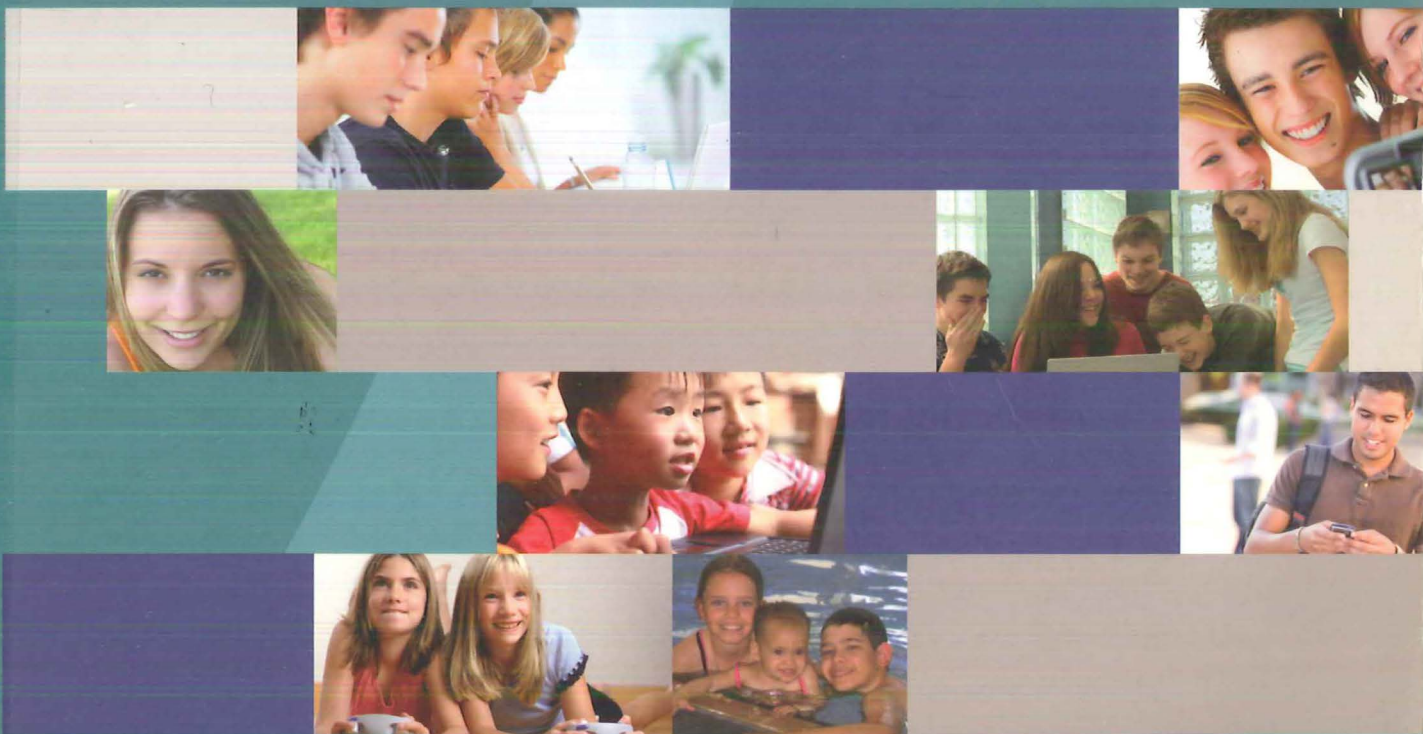
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Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study



Child Health Promotion Research Centre
Edith Cowan University, May 2009



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Executive summary

The safety of members of the school community is essential to enhance the academic, social development and well being of young people. In line with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) is regarded as a highly innovative, collaborative effort on behalf of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to foster the development and implementation of a series of whole-of-school initiatives to produce an integrated national policy for the prevention and early intervention of bullying and other aggressive and violent behaviours.

Yet despite the impact of the NSSF in terms of reducing direct, face-to-face 'overt' bullying, such as hitting, punching, kicking and teasing, evidence suggests that a less direct form of 'covert' bullying is becoming more prevalent and insidious, fuelled in part by the growth of new forms of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). From this perspective, the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS), commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), represents a significant first step to understand and tackle this phenomenon.

The ACBPS investigated young people's experiences with covert bullying including: the nature and types of covert bullying behaviours used by young people, how often and where these behaviours occur, and risk and protective factors that may inhibit or encourage covert bullying behaviour. This report aims to shed new light on covert bullying among school-age children, with the ultimate goal of identifying feasible, effective and sustainable policy and practice to address this phenomenon.

While the general concepts and theories underlying covert bullying are not new, research into how to address covert bullying is still in its infancy. This is due in part to the erroneous perception that while covert bullying is unpleasant it is generally considered to be a less harmful form of behaviour. Emerging research indicates, however, that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health problems than overt bullying, and is not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, but also has the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale than overt bullying. Furthermore, the recent digital media revolution of the last decade has provided an additional platform and encouraged a communication culture within which covert bullying can operate among young people.

The ACBPS report describes the triangulation of covert bullying behaviour data collected using mixed methods across three separate studies from a total of 20 832 Australian students aged 8 to 14 years from over 200 schools and 456 school staff. The following series of qualitative and quantitative covert bullying sub-studies and desk research were conducted:

- Sub-study 1 – Synthesis of published theoretical and empirical evidence;
- Sub-study 2 – Qualitative data (2007) collected from 84 students aged 8 to 13 years;
- Sub-study 3 – Quantitative CHPRC data (from existing data sources 2002-2006) collected from 13 330 students aged 8 to 14 years; and
- Sub-study 4 – Cross-sectional quantitative national data (2007) collected from 7 418 students aged 8 to 14 years and 456 school staff.

While the findings from each sub-study provided insights to the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Australia, findings from sub-studies 1-3 were systematically used to ensure the national quantitative study (sub-study 4) instruments provided developmentally appropriate, relevant, valid and reliable measures of covert and overt bullying behaviours and their predictors. The data from sub-studies 1-3 also provided an opportunity to compare the findings from the quantitative study with previous research in this area, including research with Australian students.

This report comprises six chapters that describe the findings from these four ACBPS sub-studies and recommendations for national, state and school policy and practice.

Major findings from the report

Defining covert bullying

- Students reported that the term 'covert' bullying was an adult term not typically used by young people and suggested that young people would think about this form of bullying as a series of discreet behaviours rather than classifying them as covert or overt. Moreover, they suggested that covert bullying is any form of bullying behaviour that is 'not seen by adults'. Hence, while covert bullying is defined in the literature as a less direct form of 'hidden' bullying, the students suggested that covert bullying to them was 'any form of bullying that is hidden'. Students reported the following examples of covert bullying behaviours are difficult for teachers and other adults to see including: 'anything behind her back'; hand gestures; weird or threatening looks; whispering; excluding; blackmailing; spreading rumours; threatening; and stealing friends. Other behaviours suggested include damaging social relationships, playing practical jokes, breaking secrets, gossiping, criticising clothes and personalities, abusive notes, facial expressions, and turning your back on a person.
- Cyber bullying was defined by young people as cruel covert bullying used primarily by young people to harm others using technology such as: social networking sites, other chat-rooms, mobile phones, websites and web-cameras.
- For the purpose of the ACBPS overall, covert bullying was broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is 'hidden', out of sight of, or unacknowledged by adults. Covert bullying includes behaviours linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression as long as the behaviour remains either unwitnessed, or unaddressed, by an adult.

Prevalence of bullying generally

- Being bullied every few weeks or more often (considered to be frequent) overtly and/or covertly during the last term at school is a fairly common experience, affecting approximately one in four Year 4 to Year 9 Australian students (27%). Frequent school bullying was highest among Year 5 (32%) and Year 8 (29%) students. Hurtful teasing was the most prevalent of all bullying behaviours experienced by students, followed by having hurtful lies told about them.

- The majority of students (61%) who had been bullied in any way had also experienced covert bullying (either on its own or in conjunction with overt bullying). Of students who had experienced covert bullying, 60% had also been teased in 'nasty' ways, 24% had been physically hurt, and 13% had been sent nasty messages on the internet. Slightly over half (53%) of students who said that they bullied others had engaged in covert bullying (either on its own or in conjunction with overt bullying).
- Both overt and covert bullying were commonly observed by staff, with about 70% observing or having both these types of bullying reported to them in the term the survey was conducted.
- Less than one in ten students (9%) reported that they generally bullied others every few weeks or more often, with 11% of boys reporting they bullied others more frequently. By comparison, only 7% of girls reported that they bullied others frequently.
- When asked qualitatively why some students bully, most believed it was because the person bullying didn't like the person they were bullying; found bullying fun; enjoyed bullying others; liked to feel tough and strong, in control and popular.

Prevalence of covert bullying

- Covert bullying appears to be one of the most under-reported of all abuses, perhaps due to the shame associated with the bullying or as a consequence of no or inappropriate responses provided by parents or teachers. Teachers and parents are more likely to intervene on physical ('overt') types of bullying behaviour than relational and social bullying. As a result, students may be encouraged to engage in covert bullying to reduce the likelihood of being detected or reprimanded.
- One in six students (16%) reported being bullied covertly every few weeks or more often in the term the survey was conducted. Students in Years 5, 6 and 8 were most likely to report being bullied in this way (18-20%) and those in Year 9 least likely (12%). This form of bullying was experienced slightly more often by girls (18%) compared with boys (15%) and in Government schools (17%) more often than non-Government schools (14%).
- Of those students who had ever experienced being bullied in ways traditionally considered to be covert, more reported being ignored, not being allowed to join in or being left out on purpose (between 40% in Year 4 and 22% in Year 9) than being made afraid they would get hurt (between 27% in Year 4 and 12% in Year 9).
- Very few students reported they covertly bullied others (5%). Although just over a half (53%) of students who said they bullied others also engaged in covert bullying (either on its own or in conjunction with overt bullying).

- Students were asked to report whether they had been perpetrators of any of the covert and overt bullying behaviours listed and the responses were combined. The lowest prevalence for bullying others (26%) was found in Year 4 and the highest (55%) in Year 9. Across all year levels, relatively few (10% or less) of the students reported only covertly bullying others whilst between about 10% and a quarter indicated they had bullied other students using both forms of bullying behaviours.
- The percentages of the students who had been both bullied and who bullied others in covert ways increased from 21% in Year 4 to almost half (47%) in Year 9.
- According to the students' self-report, being bullied in covert ways decreased from 60% in the Year 4 group to 35% in the Year 9 group. Similarly, being overtly bullied was reported at its highest among the Year 4 students (65%) and declined to 48% among the Year 9 students surveyed. Thus the students' self-report of their experiences of bullying behaviours generally decreased from Year 4 to Year 9.
- When looking at exposure to covert and overt bullying behaviours in combination, 10% or less of the students reported being targets of covert bullying only, 20% or less of overt bullying only and between 50% (in Year 4) and 28% (in Year 9) of both covert and overt bullying behaviours.
- Across all age groups, 10% or less of the students reported they had frequently been exposed to specific types of covert bullying behaviours in the previous term.
- Not all students exposed to bullying behaviours considered themselves to have been bullied. Of those exposed to only covert forms of bullying behaviours, between 19% and 35% (dependent on the year level) reported they had been bullied. By comparison, between 33% and 61% of those exposed to only overt (more direct) forms of bullying behaviours indicated they had been bullied. The majority of those who experienced both forms of bullying behaviours reported they were bullied (between 64% and 74%).
- The main findings of the (screening) quantitative analyses show that Year 4 and 8 students report the highest prevalence of bullying behaviour and that hurtful teasing is the most prevalent behaviour experienced by students, followed by having hurtful lies told about them.

Prevalence of cyber bullying

- The vast majority of Year 4 through Year 9 students had not experienced cyber bullying, with only 7-10% of students reporting they were bullied by means of technology over the school term.
- Slightly higher rates of cyber bullying were found among secondary students and students from non-Government schools.
- Cyber bullying was not observed by or reported to as many staff members as other forms of bullying, but was not rare (20%).

- Where information was available from data previously collected by the CHPRC on bullying behaviours using technology, 10% or less of students reported experiencing these behaviours.
- Differences were found in each age group regarding the mode of technology most prevalent for cyber bullying in and out of school. More internet-based bullying through social networking sites was reported than through mobile phones, especially as students get older.
- Cyber bullying appears to be related to age (or access to technology), with older students more likely to engage in cyber bullying than younger students.
- Students reported that home cyber bullying is likely to be higher among older students especially if parents don't have the knowledge and skills to help their child.

Covert bullying and gender of students

- Covert bullying appears to increase in frequency starting in the late primary school years among girls and then early secondary school years among the boys.
- Covert bullying most often occurs between students of the same gender, with boys more likely to be covertly bullied by another boy (47%) or a group of boys, and girls more likely to be bullied by another girl (48%) or a group of girls. However, nearly a third of boys (32%) and approximately a quarter of girls (28%) were bullied by both boys and girls.
- Qualitative data from students suggested girls were more likely than boys to bully in covert ways, with students beginning this behaviour as young as Year 3.
- No significant differences were found between the experiences of covert bullying behaviours for the boys and girls in the Year 4 and 6 groups in data previously collected by the CHPRC. Nevertheless, a significantly higher percentage of the girls than the boys in the Year 7 group felt that others had tried to have them socially excluded by telling lies about them and trying to make other students not like them. Girls were also more likely to have been sent mean and hurtful messages over the internet. Boys in Year 7 and Year 8 reported experiencing higher levels of threatening behaviour by being made afraid that they would be hurt. While no statistically significant gender differences were found for specific covert bullying behaviours in Year 9, girls were significantly more likely to report experiencing covert forms of bullying behaviours than boys.
- Gender was a significant predictor of bullying others in every year level. Whilst the girls were less likely to report being perpetrators of bullying behaviours, their engagement in covert behaviours only was slightly higher than for boys. In contrast, the prevalence of overt bullying behaviours was higher amongst boys, as was their use of both covert and overt forms of bullying behaviours.

Covert bullying and age of students

- As students get older there is an increasing tendency to bully using covert rather than overt bullying behaviours.
- While many teachers reported the prevalence of covert bullying to be highest in the late primary and early high school years, many staff were unsure of how many, and at what age, students were covertly bullied or covertly bullied others.
- Cyber bullying differences were found in each year group (Year 4 to 9) regarding the mode of technology, with nasty messages more likely to be sent via the internet (most often through social networking sites) than via mobile phones, more especially as students get older.

Factors associated with covert bullying

- Peer support was significantly associated with almost every bullying behaviour reported by students. Higher peer support reduced the odds of students being covertly bullied.
- Social competence reduced the odds of being covertly bullied, but was not associated with other bullying behaviours.
- Data from previous CHPRC research found that students' whose attitudes were in support of bullying were more likely to be covertly bullied and to covertly bully others. Students who had more positive attitudes to those who bullied others (pro-bully attitudes) were more likely to report being bullied (apart from exposure through technology amongst the Year 7 group) but less likely to bully others.
- Previous CHPRC data also found that those with greater expectations of negative outcomes from bullying others were also less likely to report covertly bullying others. In contrast, however, the Year 6 students who perceived more negative outcomes from bullying others were more likely to be excluded (ignored etc), whilst the Year 4 students with positive outcome expectancies were less likely to report being made afraid they would get hurt or that lies were told about them and that students tried to make others not like them.
- Students with a good understanding of social situations, but who lack empathy, find covert bullying works well in schools that do not take action to confront it. Using the peer group as an instrument of aggression requires skills and understanding of group mechanisms and leadership skills. Covert bullying requires a high level of everyday social cognition and social intelligence. No correlation has been found between overt behaviours and social intelligence.

Covert bullying locations

- Students who provided qualitative data suggested covert bullying is more likely to happen and be nastier during break times and that its prevalence was related to the type of teacher supervision in the school yard. In contrast, students suggested that in the classroom its form is 'sneakier and more careful', with the most common form being note passing.
- Bullying tends to reflect the constraints of the situation, such that covert bullying may be more common in the classroom and overt bullying more common in the school yard.
- The majority of students who provided qualitative data also felt that being hurt at school during break times, in ways teachers cannot see, would be worse than being cyber bullied at home.
- Students who provided qualitative data suggested that places where older students cyber bully or were cyber bullied include social networking sites such as MSN, MySpace and Bebo, whereas younger students referred more to bullying by sending emails and messages to phones.

Effects of covert bullying

- Covert bullying presents a higher effect-to-danger ratio, such that it contributes to the greatest harm, or effect, largely through social isolation, to the student being bullied, whilst minimising the risk that the student who is bullying will be caught, put in danger or reported for bullying.
- Across most year levels the most hurtful behaviour identified by students qualitatively was name calling (hurtful teasing) followed by exclusion, with the majority of students reporting it would be more hurtful to be bullied by the opposite sex.
- Students reported qualitatively that if they were covertly bullied they would feel lonely, scared, angry, hurt, annoyed, embarrassed, stressed, helpless, and would not enjoy school. Similarly, if they were doing the bullying they would feel 'really bad', mean, ashamed, embarrassed, guilty or sad.
- Students who were covertly bullied or who covertly bullied others reported lower levels of connectedness to their school, higher levels of loneliness at school, felt less safe at school and were more likely to experience difficulties such as emotional symptoms, conduct problems, inattention and peer relationship problems compared with students who were not covertly bullied.
- Important differences were found between Year 7 students who had moved to high school and been covertly bullied and Year 7 students in primary schools who were covertly bullied. The covertly bullied Year 7 students in secondary schools reported feeling much less safe at school (22.6% vs. 3.6%); had higher risk difficulties scores (27.9% vs. 9%); were more likely to feel lonely (75.8% vs. 46.7%); and were more likely to do nothing in response to being covertly bullied (51.3% vs. 37.2%) compared to Year 7 students who were covertly bullied but still located in primary schools.

Identity of person bullying in covert ways

- Most of the students (88%) who experienced covert bullying, knew the person(s) who bullied them (or at least one of the people if they were bullied by more than one person). However, half (48%) of the students in Year 7 in secondary schools and one third (32%) of the students in Year 6 were bullied or also bullied covertly by someone they did not know.
- Year 9 students (compared with other year levels) were more likely to have been bullied over the internet, both by someone they had met while on the internet (12%) and by someone whose identity they did not know (17%).
- Students were most likely to be covertly bullied by students in their own year group (91%) or students in the year above them (50%).

Responding to covert bullying

- Most students who were covertly bullied indicated that they responded by walking away (75%), staying away from the person(s) or the place where it happened (74%), ignoring the student(s) involved (72%), or becoming angry (72%).
- Friends (64%) followed by parents or guardians (57%) and then teachers and other staff members (46%) were the people students most commonly went to for help to deal with a bullying problem. Whereas boys (33%) were more likely than girls (23%) to not ask anyone for help, over half (56-57%) had spoken with friends or a parent.
- Young people reported losing faith in reporting bullying behaviour because some teachers and other adults are not taking action or not recognising covert bullying as bullying when they see it or when it is reported, especially via cyber means.
- Seeking help from an adult was not always effective, with more students indicating the bullying situation stayed the same or got worse (45%) instead of improving (28%).
- Students reported qualitatively they would not tell an adult if they were being or had been cyber bullied for fear of having their computer or mobile phone removed.
- School policies that increase the consequences of overt bullying without increasing the consequences of covert bullying unintentionally create fertile ground for the emergence of covert bullying.

Staff attitudes to covert bullying

- The vast majority of staff were not accepting of bullying behaviours, and see themselves as having a responsibility to prevent bullying and to assist students who are being bullied.
- Female teachers (52%) were more likely to consider covert bullying to be more hurtful than overt bullying compared with male teachers (31%).
- Teachers who lack training to help them understand covert bullying are less able to recognise it, often consider it less serious or problematic, and have less empathy for children who are covertly bullied and are less likely to intervene to prevent it. As a result students don't tell them how they are feeling or talk about incidences of covert bullying because they feel it doesn't count.
- Covert bullying seems to have the greatest amount of suffering with the greatest chance of its occurrence going unnoticed. Hence young people perceive that it is condoned by adults.
- Overt and covert bullying were both commonly observed by staff. Around 70% of staff observed or had each type of bullying reported to them in the term the survey was conducted.
- Teachers perceived the prevalence of covert bullying to be highest in the late primary and early high school years, but many staff were unsure of how many students were covertly bullied or covertly bullied others.
- The majority of staff surveyed had observed a negative impact on students who had been bullied in the current term. Social withdrawal was the behavioural effect most commonly reported by staff (73%). Nervousness at school, depression, and declines in academic engagement and performance had all been observed by at least one half of the staff during the term.

Strategies to reduce covert bullying in schools

- Over one half of the teachers surveyed rated the current whole school bullying prevention strategies in place in their school as moderately or very effective in reducing covert bullying (57%) with 21% indicating the strategies were only slightly effective, and 5% indicating they were ineffective.
- Strategies such as supervising students during lunch breaks were seen as more effective amongst primary school staff, whereas secondary staff were slightly more likely to rate strategies incorporating the school health services or the school behaviour management/pastoral care committee as more effective. Differences were also evident between staff in metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and Government and non-Government schools.
- There was slightly less recognition of, and more uncertainty by, teachers about how to address bullying involving technology compared with other forms of bullying.
- Qualitative data from students suggested a variety of actions that they believe teachers could take to reduce covert bullying including helping young people to talk more with their parents and other trusted adults about these issues using strategies such as classroom meetings, an anonymous 'worry box', and separating different age groups of students during break times.
- The literature review suggested that the most promising interventions appear to be those that take a more whole-school approach, although their success has varied. Effective school policies to prevent and deal with covert bullying will require the development of programs aimed at:
 - enhancing a positive school climate and ethos which promotes pro-social behaviours;
 - providing pre-service and in-service training of all school staff to assist them to recognise and respond appropriately to signs of covert bullying;
 - creating physical environments that limit the invisibility of covert bullying;
 - increasing the awareness among young people of how group mechanisms work and strengthening their skills in conflict resolution; and
 - developing anonymous, peer-led support structures for students to access when they feel uncomfortable.

Management of school bullying

- Government school teachers indicated that they spent more time managing bullying incidents with students or parents each week compared with non-Government school teachers, for both general bullying (22% and 10%) and covert bullying (13% and 4%).
- Teachers reported being more likely to intervene on overt bullying than covert bullying.

School needs to address bullying

- The majority of staff (67%) felt other teachers at their school needed more training to enhance their skills to deal with a range of issues related to covert bullying, such as dealing with incidents or addressing covert (including cyber bullying) within the curriculum. Actions and motives underlying covert bullying behaviours need to be understood to know how to intervene and prevent.
- To address covert bullying, schools must first review how teachers are currently intervening to reduce this problem and the impact this is having. If covert bullying is believed to be less harmful, not recognised and/or adequately addressed by school staff, students who are covertly bullied are more likely to believe this behaviour is tolerated or condoned, feel less empowered and less willing to tell, which in turn may establish a normative culture of acceptance of this form of behaviour.

Recommendations from this report

1.0 Recommendations for national policy and practice

Short term

- 1.1 Establish an Australian Council for Bullying Prevention that reports to the Prime Minister, chaired by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, to lead the review of the National Safe Schools Framework and the concurrent development of a strategy that considers the following recommendations.
- 1.2 Facilitate sustainable joined-up-Government structures (including education, health, community development, and justice) and approaches to deliver key reforms.
- 1.3 Facilitate ongoing and active input from teachers, parents, and young people through linking with existing groups and organisations, such as the Safe and Supportive School Communities, the Consultative Working Group on cyber safety, and parent, teacher and student bodies.
- 1.4 Revise the National Safe Schools Framework and its implementation in schools to explicitly encourage schools to address covert and overt bullying and provide the necessary resources to support schools to minimise this bullying through their policy and practice.

Longer term

- 1.5 Establish ongoing and routine data collection systems with standardised methods for defining and measuring covert and overt forms of bullying.
- 1.6 Facilitate sustainable longitudinal research to investigate the developmental trajectory, causes, protective factors, social and economic costs, societal and cultural influences, and identify the windows of opportunity for covert bullying prevention and intervention.
- 1.7 Support applied intervention research to determine the impact of promising strategies to reduce covert bullying that protect and support those involved, promote healthy relationships, reduce perpetration of bullying, and change the circumstances and conditions (individual, relationship, society, structural) that give rise to covert bullying.
- 1.8 Leverage the effectiveness of these interventions by establishing and evaluating linkages between these interventions with other programs such as those addressing domestic violence, aggression, harassment and child abuse.

1.9 Assess the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of bullying prevention and reduction interventions and determine the thresholds of level of implementation necessary to reduce both overt and covert bullying.

1.10 Work collaboratively with systems and sectors to support and monitor the implementation of the revised National Safe Schools Framework.

2.0 Recommendations for education systems and sectors

2.1 Encourage school leadership and other staff to recognise in an ongoing manner that covert bullying is as important as overt bullying and forms part of the National Safe Schools Framework as a national priority for ongoing professional development.

2.2 Promote and encourage greater awareness among schools about the National Safe Schools Framework and its implications for students' learning, achievements, health and well being.

2.3 Assist district/regional offices to establish links with schools and community structures and services to support students who are vulnerable to covert bullying and to help manage the behaviour of students engaged in this form of bullying.

2.4 Provide access to and support quality professional learning for school staff to help them understand the different forms and potential harms of covert bullying and school inaction, and develop staff attitudes and self-efficacy to take action to address bullying behaviour, particularly covert bullying.

2.5 Ensure new teachers entering the profession and other adults working with young people as part of their professional standards receive pre-service training and ongoing professional learning to help prevent and manage bullying, especially covert bullying behaviour.

3.0 Recommendations for schools

3.1 Establish with the whole school clear definitions of covert (as well as overt) bullying to ensure this behaviour is more specifically and consistently addressed in the school and understood by the whole school.

3.2 Establish clear policies, programs and procedures, developed in collaboration with staff, students and parents, which explicitly address covert bullying as part of the school's response to all forms of bullying.

3.3 Ensure procedural steps to manage covert bullying are developed by the whole school collaboratively and are clearly documented, and the roles and responsibilities of staff, students and parents are well understood.

- 3.4 Survey students regularly to monitor and determine the types of covert and overt forms of bullying behaviours they are experiencing and in what social contexts, to develop tailored universal and targeted programs to diminish this behaviour.
- 3.5 Address covert and overt forms of bullying throughout schooling to ameliorate their harms in concert with improvement in students' language skills and other social-cognitive abilities.
- 3.6 Teach students about social skills, group mechanisms, motives for bullying, being effective bystanders and how they may be drawn into the bullying process, to help them feel more aware of pressures exerted on the group and their responsibility to deal with them.
- 3.7 Examine the determinants of student cyber bullying behaviour as part of the whole school response to bullying, not the technology in which it is being manifest.
- 3.8 Provide professional learning and resources to help primary and secondary school staff to enhance student transition and reduce the subsequent bullying, particularly covert bullying, which continues to increase following transitions in school.
- 3.9 Create physical environments in schools and staff supervision practices that limit the invisibility of covert bullying behaviour.
- 3.10 Support families through systematic parent awareness raising and skill building, training and support.
- 3.11 Maintain regular, clear communication with parents about covert bullying behaviour and effective ways to deal with it.

Bullying concerns and affects us all.

(Kandersteg Declaration, Switzerland, June 10, 2007)^[1]

References

1. Kandersteg Declaration Against Bullying in Children and Youth. (2007). *Joint Efforts Against Victimization Conference in Kandersteg, Switzerland*, from <http://www.kanderstegdeclaration.org/pdf/KanderstegDeclarationEN.pdf>



Introduction to the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS)

- 1.1 Context
- 1.2 Background to the research
- 1.3 The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study
- 1.4 Research objectives
- 1.5 ACBPS report structure
- 1.6 References



By its very nature covert bullying behaviour among young people does not provide easy policy and practice options.

1.1 Context

The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is committed to working with State and Territory Government and non-Government education authorities to ensure all school students can learn in an environment which is free from all forms of bullying, harassment, violence, abuse and neglect.

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) was commissioned by DEEWR to address the lack of current, reliable evidence about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in the Australian cultural context, and to provide a foundation for informed action. This comprehensive study, conducted by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC), at Edith Cowan University, aimed to improve the knowledge and understanding of the key determinants, temporal development, predictors, prevalence and outcomes of covert bullying, to ultimately determine effective policy and practice to address this problem. The Study was designed to provide information, at a representative national level, about what constitutes covert bullying, the forms it takes, by whom it is practiced, towards whom it is directed, how frequently it is experienced, and the impact it has on those who are bullied. It also aimed to include reference to emerging forms of cyber bullying (such as internet and mobile phone-based bullying), as well as other forms of covert bullying including relational bullying.

1.2 Background to the research

Covert bullying is a less direct form of 'hidden' bullying, that arguably is becoming more prevalent and insidious among students both as a result of the incomplete implementation of school bullying prevention policies, and the advent of newer Information and Communications Technology (ICT). It is widely accepted that bullying involves the 'systematic abuse of power' through unjustified and repeated acts of aggressive behaviour intended to inflict harm^[1]. Only recently, however, has there been recognition that bullying is more than merely a physical or verbal conflict between two personalities, but rather involves a complex social interaction between peer groups^[2; 3].

Covert bullying may take a number of forms such as spreading gossip, hurtful stories or rumours; deliberately excluding or enforcing social isolation; and even cyber bullying. While the general concepts and theories underlying covert bullying including definitions of indirect, relational, and social aggression are not new^[4-6], research into how to address covert bullying is still in its infancy. This is due, in part, to the fact that in the past covert bullying has been erroneously perceived as an unpleasant but generally less harmful form of childhood behaviour^[7; 8]. Considerable research indicates that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health problems than overt bullying^[9-15]. Those problems are not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, but also have the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale^[16-18]. Both boys and girls rate covert bullying as worse than physical bullying, causing considerable distress and psychological harm^[9-12; 14]. The recent digital media revolution has provided young people with an extra platform and communication culture upon which covert bullying can operate^[19-21]. While initial research emerging from this study indicates that 'traditional' forms of covert bullying, including threatening behaviour, spreading nasty rumours, ignoring, and teasing are still some of the most prevalent forms of covert bullying in Australian schools, the use of technology to also deliver these forms of bullying behaviour is likely to rise significantly in future years.

Covert bullying and its effects are further compounded in schools where teachers fail to recognise and/or respond effectively to these incidents. While schools often have clear policies and actions to address overt bullying such as physical or verbal bullying, teacher discomfort with the ambiguity of covert bullying may be a factor in their lack of intervention when it does occur. Schools more often have clear policies and responses with regard to physical and verbal bullying. Covert bullying is, however, by its very nature difficult to detect and therefore less likely to be outlined clearly in school policy guidelines. Recent findings suggest teachers consider covert bullying to be less serious than other forms of bullying and are therefore less likely to intervene^[7; 22]. Similarly, the majority of students report they didn't tell teachers about bullying because they perceive it won't make any difference, or in a third to a quarter of cases, students report that their telling made matters worse^[23-25].

Consequently, there exists a clear need for a comprehensive understanding of the nature, risk and protective factors associated with covert bullying behaviour to guide evidence-informed practice and policy.

1.3 The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study

There is international recognition of Australian bullying prevention research and the National Safe Schools Framework, aimed at building safe and supportive whole of school environments to prevent bullying, harassment, violence and child abuse. More recently, awareness has grown within Australia of an increasingly insidious, non-confrontational covert form of bullying.

To-date, information about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in schools is limited and not representative of Australian children, providing a poor evidence base to ascertain the extent of covert bullying and, consequently, a poor foundation for informed national action. The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) aimed to redress the lack of recent and reliable evidence about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in the Australian context, and to identify possible policy and practice options for schools that are practicable, relevant, and acceptable to Australian education systems, sectors and schools. This report aims to shed new light on covert bullying among school-age children, with the ultimate goal of identifying feasible, effective and sustainable policy and practice to address this phenomenon.

The ACBPS report presents a triangulation of covert bullying behaviour data collected using mixed methods from Australian students aged 8 to 14 years. The following data were utilised:

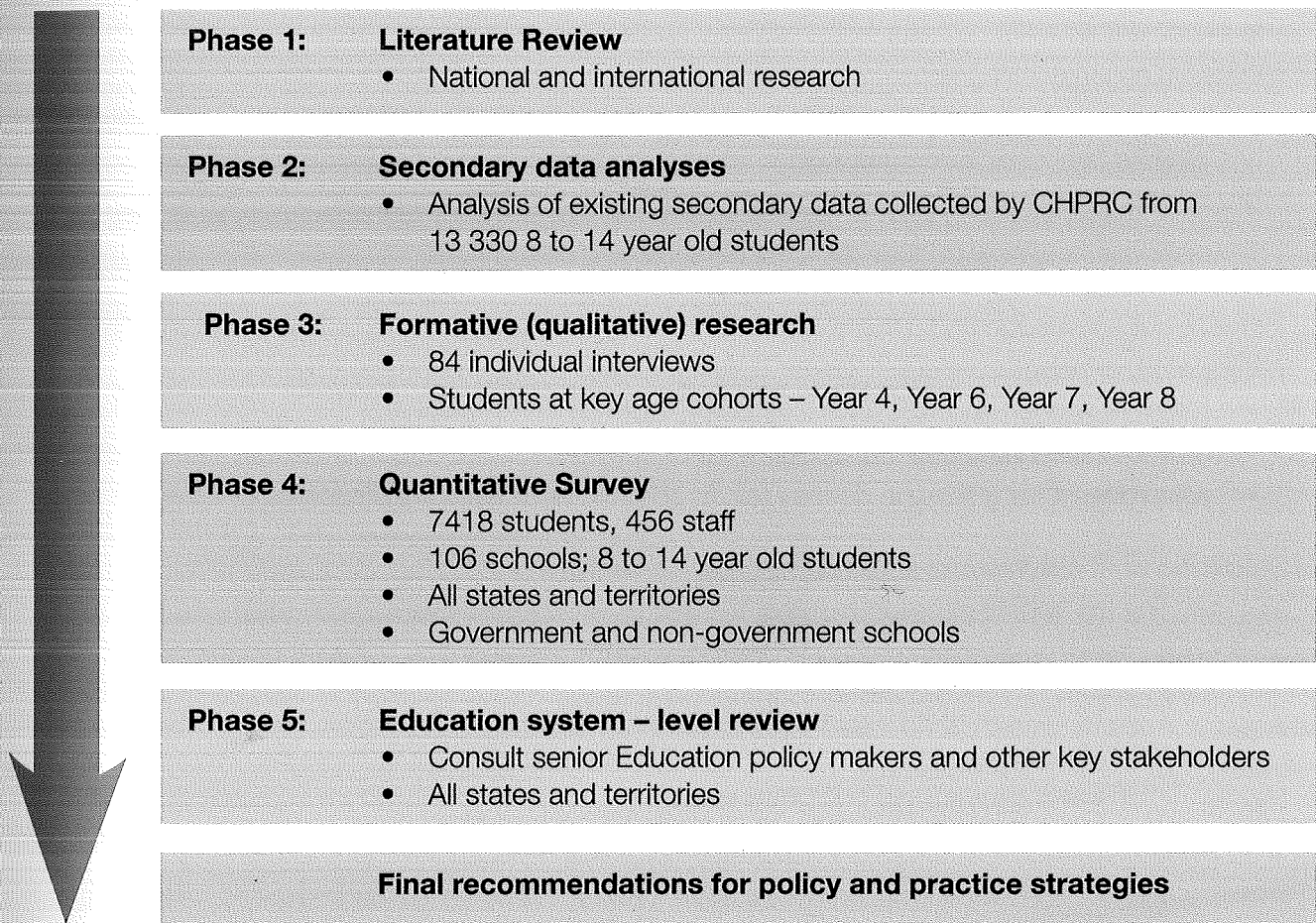
1. Published theoretical and empirical evidence;
2. Qualitative data collected (2007) from 84 students aged 8 to 13 years;
3. Quantitative CHPRC data (from existing data sources 2002-2006) from 13 330 students aged 8 to 14 years; and
4. Cross-sectional quantitative national data collected (2007) from 7 418 students aged 8 to 14 years and 456 school staff.

Consultation took place with international and Australian bullying prevention researchers and other experts in education and health promotion. This consultation helped to determine pertinent issues to guide this study and identified research gaps, especially in the area of cyber bullying, to better inform the design of our formative research phases. Information from researchers also helped to define covert bullying for this study, identified key published research for the literature review, and provided advice and items for the qualitative interview and quantitative survey instruments. Several researchers also assessed the content validity of items used for the national survey.

For the purpose of the ACBPS overall, covert bullying has been broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is 'hidden', out of sight of, or unacknowledged by adults. Covert bullying includes behaviours linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression as long as the behaviour remains either unwitnessed, or unaddressed, by an adult. Across the ACBPS sub-studies, covert bullying has been defined slightly differently, but generally has been considered as encompassing repeated acts of bullying in ways that can't be easily seen by others, including by means of technology.

The iterative and multifaceted research design of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study is depicted below (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study Design



1.4 Research objectives

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study aimed to:

- a) Improve our understanding of the nature and extent of covert bullying among students aged 8-14 years, and to assess the social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural impact it has on young people involved in this behaviour:
 - the prevalence and insidiousness of covert bullying in metropolitan and rural Australia;
 - at what age it begins, what form(s) it takes, when it usually occurs, with what other forms of bullying it is associated, who it involves, young people's perceptions of its causes and the extent to which multiple contexts are used (what are the primary mediums through which covert bullying manifests, and is there a progression among the different mediums);
 - who is bullied, how do they feel, and how does it affect them (emotionally, socially, physically, behaviourally);
 - forms of covert bullying and their prevalence among girls and boys, and age-related patterns; and
 - how frequently young people witness covert bullying, how they feel about it, what is their response, and how do they think the person being bullied feels.
- b) Increase our knowledge and understanding of the degree to which young people themselves have participated, or been offenders in, covert bullying, as well as the reasons for their involvement:
 - when, how often and why have they been involved;
 - how they rationalise their behaviour, what do they gain from it and how do they feel about it; and
 - when does it happen, who do they talk to about it, what were the outcomes of telling.
- c) Determine what children and adolescents believe would be the best form(s) of support for preventing and reducing the impact of covert bullying, to what extent they believe parents, teachers, and other adults can intervene effectively, and what their main fears are regarding talking to adults.
- d) Assess understanding by school staff of covert bullying and the most effective means of dealing with it.
- e) Review national and international published empirical and theoretical literature addressing covert bullying to identify effective strategies which could be used by parents/schools.

1.5 ACBPS report structure

This report is divided into six chapters that address the methods and findings of each of the phases of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study shown in Figure 1.1.


Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) including the identification of key issues related to the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Australian schools.

Chapter 2 provides a systematic and comprehensive literature review that addresses the concepts underlying covert bullying, analysed within historical, social, developmental and contextual frameworks. In addition to reviewing individual, school, family and community-based factors associated with covert bullying, the review assesses the potential impact of the growth in electronic information and communication technologies in terms of cyber bullying, and the effect this may have on the nature of covert bullying in the future. Finally, the review examines potential or promising interventions to prevent or reduce covert bullying, particularly whole school approaches that have historically targeted overt physical and verbal bullying, incorporating new approaches to assist school personnel, teachers, parents and peers to effectively address covert bullying.

Chapter 3 of the report outlines the findings of a series of linked data analyses obtained from secondary data sources which utilised four large longitudinal data sets that included covert bullying variables, from research conducted by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre from 2002 to 2006. These data were collected from 13 330 students in Years 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The oldest CHPRC data set used for this retrospective review was collected from Year 4 students in 2002 as part of the Friendly Schools Friendly Families (FSFF) bullying prevention project. Data obtained from upper primary and secondary school students were used from:

- the Supportive Schools Project (SSP), a secondary school bullying prevention project;
- the Marijuana Education Project (MEP), a study which investigated the clustering of marijuana use and other problem behaviours (including bullying) among secondary school aged students; and
- the Extra-Curricular (EC) project, which investigated factors that predict student connectedness or otherwise to school, of which experiences with bullying behaviours was hypothesised as a factor.

Findings from this analysis of secondary data were used to contextualise the 2007 ACBPS quantitative national survey data presented in Chapter 5 and to provide a historical perspective of the prevalence and major predictors of covert bullying behaviour among Years 4 to 9 students from 2002 to 2006.



Chapter 4 describes the major findings from the ACBPS qualitative research phase. This phase aimed to provide greater depth in understanding of the nature, motivations for and extent of covert bullying, from 8 to 13 year old students who are involved in these behaviours, and subsequently to use these data to improve the relevance, reading level and content validity of the 2007 quantitative national survey items. This formative information was especially needed in the area of cyber bullying where few previously validated and reliable items have been developed to measure this behaviour. This study phase comprised two parts; an initial brief quantitative screening assessment to identify the qualitative sample, followed by 84 individual interviews with Years 4, 6, 7 and 8 students who reported in a preliminary selection or screening instrument they were covertly bullied and /or covertly bullied others.

Chapter 5 reports the research methods and results of a quantitative national survey among a large number of students and school staff conducted from October to December 2007. This phase of the ACBPS study used a cross-sectional design to assess the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Government and non-Government schools in metropolitan and country areas. This nationally representative survey was completed by 7418 Years 4 to 9 students and 456 school staff from 106 schools across Australia in November 2007.

The final chapter of the report, Chapter 6, describes the ACBPS recommendations and the review process undertaken by representative stakeholders. The review involved consultation with senior education policy makers and other stakeholders across all States and Territories. This feedback was used to refine recommendations about policy and practice for national and State education systems and sectors, and primary and secondary schools. The recommendations are contextualised using existing Australian research on bullying in schools considered generally, and Australian and international research on covert bullying. In particular, the conclusions and recommendations drawn from this research provide some practical indications and strategies to address covert bullying, acknowledging where possible the existing parameters of school education policy, legislation and practice.

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It is the moral responsibility of adults to ensure children's rights are honoured and that healthy development and citizenship are promoted.

(Kandersteg Declaration, Switzerland, June 10, 2007)^[1]

2.1 Introduction

The safety of all school members is an essential prerequisite to promote effective schools that enhance the academic, emotional, social development and well being of young people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ^[2] reinforces the importance of protecting children's quality of life and their rights to be educated in a safe environment, free from all forms of violence, victimisation, harassment and neglect. In line with this basic right, the Australian community has become increasingly aware of the prevalence, seriousness and negative impacts of school bullying – a form of aggression considered to affect the greatest number of students ^[3]. Research in Australia has indicated that approximately ten percent of school students reported being bullied most days or even every day at school, with almost one half reporting they were bullied at least once during the past term at school ^[4]. These rates of bullying between students are among the highest in the world ^[5].

In 1994 the Commonwealth Government of Australia launched a national inquiry into school violence ^[6] which concluded that school bullying represented a significant national problem and called for the development, implementation and evaluation of programs aimed at reducing school bullying. In response to this inquiry, the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) was endorsed in 2003 by all Australian Ministers of Education, on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) ^[7]. The NSSF was guided by a vision that Australian schools should provide a safe and supportive environment. In 2004 legislation was passed that required all schools to align their policies with these eleven guiding principles of the NSSF:

1. Affirm the right of all school community members to feel safe at school.
2. Promote care, respect and cooperation, and value diversity.
3. Implement policies, programs and processes to nurture a safe and supportive school environment.
4. Recognise that quality leadership is an essential element that underpins the creation of a safe and supportive school environment.
5. Develop and implement policies and programs through processes that engage the whole school community.
6. Ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all members of the school community in promoting a safe and supportive environment are explicit, clearly understood and disseminated.
7. Recognise the critical importance of pre-service and ongoing professional development in creating a safe and supportive school environment.
8. Have a responsibility to provide opportunities for students to learn through the formal curriculum the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for positive relationships.
9. Focus on policies that are proactive and oriented towards prevention and intervention.
10. Regularly monitor and evaluate their policies and programs so that evidence-based practice supports decisions and improvements.
11. Take action to protect children from all forms of abuse and neglect.

To support schools in the development and implementation of effective programs addressing these guidelines, the Australian Government made available in 2004 \$1 million for the implementation of the Best Practice Grants Programme. From this perspective, the NSSF represented a highly innovative, positive approach aimed at addressing growing national concerns regarding both the extent^[8-11], as well as the serious deleterious implications^[3; 12] of youth aggression and particularly bullying among Australian students. The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) served to heighten awareness of the importance of achieving a shared vision of physical and emotional safety and well-being of all students in Australian schools. In addition it assisted in the identification of guiding principles and strategies to inform practice and assist school communities to build safe and supportive environments. The NSSF was a collaborative effort by the Commonwealth, and State and Territory Governments, as well as non-Government school authorities and other key stakeholders. The shared commitment to the NSSF's goals and policies have been echoed through State Government plans^[13]. For instance, the Australian Government and all States and Territories are funding the collaborative initiative known as the Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC). The SSSC project and the associated *Bullying. No way!* website is a nationwide mechanism for sharing information, resources and successful practices to counter bullying, harassment and violence in Australian schools. The NSSF has also fostered a series of whole school programs^[14], many of which have shown the potential for significant positive impacts on the overall social and emotional health and well-being of school children^[15-19]. Hence, the NSSF fomented Australia's place internationally, alongside some European countries, at the forefront of bullying research. More importantly, Australia was one of the first countries to produce an integrated national policy for the prevention and early intervention of bullying and other aggressive behaviours.

While the concept of school bullying is hardly a new phenomena (with references to it in books like Tom Brown's School Days (1857)), modern research into the topic began with Olweus' pioneering book on Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys (1978). In later studies, Olweus defined bullying ^[20] as a specific type of aggressive behaviour that is "intended to cause harm, through repeated actions carried out over time, targeted at an individual who is not in a position to defend him/herself". This definition of bullying, as a form of unprovoked, intentional behaviour characterised by a power imbalance, has gained wide acceptance both nationally and internationally ^[21-25].

Since then, a growing body of research has indicated that both bullying and being bullied can have extensive physical, social and mental health consequences, with a notable impact on academic achievement and social development ^[11; 20; 26-32]. Young people who are bullied tend to have a dislike of ^[33] and want to avoid school ^[34-36], have lower academic competence ^[37] and have higher absenteeism ^[37-39]. Students who are bullied are also more likely to have low self-esteem ^[40-42] and poor assertiveness skills ^[40] and this can affect their psychological and mental health, and result in academic difficulties due to social exclusion, peer rejection, depression, and negative self-perceptions ^[11; 26; 28; 29; 43-48]. They are also more likely to have poorer health ^[11; 49] and more somatic complaints ^[50-53]; more interpersonal difficulties ^[38; 54]; higher levels of loneliness ^[33-35]; suicidal ideation ^[31]; and increased anxiety ^[55]. Alternatively, students who bully others are more likely to be aggressive, impulsive, insecure, lack empathy, and have poor personal and social skills ^[51; 56-58].

While the ramifications of bullying may not be experienced until adolescence or even adulthood, the developmental pathways to such outcomes are in place by early childhood ^[20; 59-61]. What has become evident is that youth aggression and behavioural maladjustment are not issues that appear suddenly in adolescence ^[62], but rather are learned or acquired behaviours ^[63] that follow a trajectory from lower level childhood bullying and aggression, to higher level youth violence ^[30; 64; 65]. Recent longitudinal data has highlighted the on-going consequences of such anti-social behaviour ^[25; 59; 66; 67], and have contributed to the theory that bullying is an intra and inter-generational phenomenon, with children who bully others at the age of 14 years likely to still engage in aggression at the age of 32 years and to have children who themselves engage in bullying and aggression ^[68; 69].

In light of this growing evidence on the harmful long term effects of bullying on young people and on society in general, as well as data on the extent of bullying among Australian students ^[8-11], it is evident that the National Safe Schools Framework has served as a vital first step in promoting Commonwealth and State investment in preventative whole school programs. Despite their proliferation, the majority of these school based bullying prevention programs in Australia, as elsewhere, have to date tended to focus primarily on direct, face-to-face overt bullying, such as hitting, punching, kicking and teasing which is easier for teachers and parents to detect and therefore understand ^[8; 17; 70-74].

More recently, however, research and meta-analyses of the outcomes of large-scale interventions to prevent school bullying both within Australia and internationally have shown varied results [75-77], with an important component in successful interventions being related to the degree of commitment and training on the part of teachers [78]. These findings, together with growing media coverage of extreme cases of school violence, youth suicides, and cyber safety infringements, has heightened public awareness and forced policy makers and researchers to re-examine and broaden their definitions of bullying, and to take a closer look at the changing nature of bullying among students today [23; 59; 76; 79].

Within this context, the present study has focused on covert bullying, a less direct form or 'hidden' bullying, that arguably is becoming more prevalent and insidious among students both as a result of the implementation of improved school policies to deal with overt bullying, and with the advent of new forms of information and communication technology (ICT). Covert bullying may take a number of forms such as spreading gossip, hurtful stories or rumours; deliberately excluding or enforcing social isolation; and even bullying using cyber communication technology, an emerging trend which will be discussed in greater detail later. While the general concepts and theories underlying covert bullying, including definitions of indirect, relational, and social aggression, are not new [80-82], research into how to address covert bullying is still in its infancy, due in part to the fact that in the past it has been erroneously perceived as an unpleasant but generally less harmful form of childhood behaviour [83; 84]. Nevertheless, emerging research indicates that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health scars than overt bullying [21; 66; 85-89], that are not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, and also have the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale [90-92].

The recent digital media revolution has provided today's young people with an extra platform and communication culture upon which covert bullying can operate [93-95]. And, while initial research emerging from this study indicates that 'traditional' forms of covert bullying, including gossiping, ignoring, and teasing are still the most prevalent forms of covert bullying in Australian schools, the incidence of cyber bullying is likely to rise in future years. Further, the Australian Labor Government's pledge to invest \$1 billion over four years in capital grants to school systems to provide 'world class information and communications technology (ICT) for every secondary student in Years 9 to 12' [96], means that without the 'right' levels of education, support and constraints in place in schools and homes, young people may become even more vulnerable to technology-based harm. Australian schools will also be receiving broadband connections, which will deliver internet speeds around 100 times faster than most current speeds in schools [97]. While this technology will help to maximise the benefits offered by online curriculum content it will also provide an environment that can potentially fester harm to young people through their own or others' misuse of this technology [85; 94; 98-105]. Unless the Government adopts an equally proactive approach to researching, developing and implementing coherent whole of school policies to assist teachers, parents, children and the broader community to address covert bullying, we are likely to see an escalation in this form of aggressive behaviour. From this perspective, the current report represents a first step in understanding and tackling this emerging phenomenon.

2.2 Covert bullying as an emerging social phenomenon

The nature of all forms of bullying means that it tends to occur where adult supervision is low or absent. Studies conducted in various countries have found it to be one of the most under-reported of all abuses [79], and although under reporting has generally been viewed as a result of the shame associated with victimisation, Olweus et al. [106] suggests that the inconsequential or inappropriate response of teachers and/or parents was another reason why only a small proportion of young people report bullying.

Policies introduced in most schools across Australia as a result of the National Safe Schools Framework have attempted to change the views and responses of principals and teachers to bullying, from one that in the past treated problems and managed crises, to one based on the promotion of positive social environments and behaviours [58]. To this end, the National Safe Schools Framework incorporates a comprehensive mandate that requires changes to: policy and practice; classroom management and curriculum; school ethos; school, home and community links; student teams; and the physical environment. In practice, however, schools have finite resources and capacity to address bullying. Consequently, they must adopt policies and practices that are most appropriate to their situations. Past national research indicates approximately 50 per cent of reported bullying happens during school break times [4; 107]. The most widely adopted responses by schools have emphasised: improving active supervision by duty staff; increasing their visibility and consistency of response; modifying teacher duty areas to cover 'hot spots' of high bullying prevalence; encouraging understanding of social rights and responsibilities among all bystanders; and using student supporters to encourage bullied students to seek help from a trusted adult.

While these policies and practices have served to reduce the cases of 'visible', physical school yard aggression, evidence is emerging that where they have been implemented in isolation of broader policies aimed at improving the overall behaviour and ethos of the whole school environment, inadvertently, they may have had an isogenic effect, forcing students to find more covert forms of bullying [108]. Borkqvist [109] used the term the 'effect-to-danger ratio' to suggest that in inflicting harm on another person or group of people, individuals look for forms of bullying that will have the greatest effect while minimising their risk of being caught or placed in danger. Similarly, Craig, Pepler and Atlas [110] found that bullying generally reflects the constraints of the situation, with covert bullying being more common in the classroom, whereas overt bullying is more common in the school yard. In a detailed study of the content of anti-bullying policies in the UK, Woods and Wolkes showed a significantly higher incidence of relational bullying, as opposed to overt bullying, in those schools that had detailed and comprehensive anti-bullying policies, compared with schools that had less thorough policies [108]. Interestingly, their study found that despite schools with strong policy scores showing higher incidences of relational bullying, they also

had the fewest children reporting being bullied in the playground, implying that a shift had taken place towards the use of more covert bullying and less noticeable bullying behaviour, as a result of better playground supervision. In line with these findings, Archer and Coyne^[111] have surmised that where schools' policies and practices have increased the costs of overt aggression, without simultaneously implementing strategies to increase the costs of indirect forms of bullying, they have unintentionally created fertile grounds for the emergence of covert bullying.

Similarly, Ferrell-Smith^[88] points out that many American school harassment policies have focused primarily on curtailing physical and direct aggression, and have placed less emphasis on establishing school-wide policies to address indirect bullying (e.g. rumour spreading, isolation and social seclusion which is more hidden). While this may in part be due to teachers' lack of training and awareness of how to recognise covert forms of bullying^[112], a recent study by Bauman and Del Rio^[83] also found that teachers have tended to treat covert bullying as a less serious issue and have less empathy for children who are bullied through relational means rather than through overt physical and verbal bullying, and as such are less likely to intervene to prevent it. Equally, other studies noted that teachers were less likely to include relational or covert forms of bullying in their definitions of bullying behaviour^[113-115] and considered it to be less problematic^[116]. Moreover, in a modified version of the Bullying Attitude Questionnaire^[110] aimed at rating primary school teachers' attitudes and reactions to physical bullying, verbal bullying, and social exclusion, Yoon and Kerber^[117] found significant differences in teacher reactions across all three bullying types, with teachers showing significantly less empathy towards, and involvement in, dealing with relational aggression.

The importance of school personnel and adults' reactions to covert bullying cannot be emphasised enough. Studies are increasingly indicating that students are less likely to report incidences of covert bullying than overt physical or verbal aggressive behaviour^[84; 116; 118], because they felt they could not count on teachers and administrators intervening to stop the bullying, suggesting that instead teachers tended to ignore or dismiss the behaviour^[83; 112; 119].

When developing and evaluating comprehensive programs for the prevention of school bullying, like the National Safe Schools Framework, it is imperative that they implement all components of the package^[120]. Teachers are essential to intervention efforts^[121] and it is crucial to address both their attitudes to different forms of bullying, as well as their awareness of, and confidence in, how to deal with more covert forms of bullying^[83]. With the growing data indicating that, for both boys and girls, covert forms of bullying are likely to 'cause the greatest amount of suffering, while they have a greater chance of going unnoticed by teachers'^[122], it is clear that the old saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me' is not only inaccurate, but is also dangerous in that it has marginalised the importance of covert bullying in the context of school bullying policy and teacher awareness. As Hazler et al.^[116] observed, the mistaken notion that physical and/or overt bullying is more serious than relational bullying needs to be reversed. School anti-bullying programs need to address the issues underlying

the reasons why young people are bullying or being bullied, using whole-school approaches aimed at developing a positive school ethos and culture through teaching pro-social values, such as acceptance of differences and compassion [16; 77; 123; 124]. Unless they do this, they run the risk of simply managing the immediate symptoms of the problem rather than developing long-term solutions. While there is growing agreement that covert bullying needs to be integrated into school policies and practices [78; 83; 116; 117], there has been to date only minimal attention given to the definition and understanding of covert bullying.

2.3 Definitions and behaviours linked with covert bullying

There is wide acceptance that bullying involves the systematic abuse of power through unjustified and repeated acts of aggressive behaviour intended to inflict harm [76]. Only recently, however, has there been a recognition that bullying is more than merely a physical or verbal conflict between two personalities, but rather involves a complex social interaction between peer groups [125; 126]. Within this context, covert bullying has been broadly defined as a more subtle, often hidden, form of non-physical, aggressive behaviour aimed at inflicting harm through peer relations, feelings of acceptance, friendships, and self-esteem that can result in social and psychological bruises that are equally, if not more painful than physical ones [111; 127-132].

Researchers have long been interested in peer group relations and aggression. Until the 1980s, both aggression and bullying were viewed primarily as direct, overt physical and verbal attacks, that were conducted in a readily observable manner [76; 133]. Since the 1990s, however, the work of Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Crick, Underwood and others has broadened the scope of aggression and bullying to include indirect, covert acts that are not readily observable to others. In line with the general definition of the term covert, as something that is secret, disguised, not open or explicit, these forms of aggression and bullying aim to inflict harm on others by spreading rumours, gossiping, excluding members from peer groups, or ignoring them. Subsequently, covert bullying has increasingly been linked with 'indirect', 'relational' and 'social' aggression.

Studies have only recently begun to measure, define and distinguish between the different forms covert bullying may take, as well as the methods of preventing and dealing with them. There is, however, still much disagreement on common terminology [111; 133-136]. Unlike direct aggression and bullying, the intentions and motives of covert bullying and indirect, relational, and social aggression are not always so easy to separate based on their actions [111]. For example, someone may gossip or talk about someone behind their back, without intending to cause harm, or without necessarily understanding or witnessing the serious nature of their consequences [76]. In reviewing the definitions of covert bullying, therefore, it is particularly important to consider the underlying motives and concepts inherent in the theories of indirect, relational and social aggression.

Indirect Aggression: Until the late 1980s, most research on indirect aggression focused on overt physical forms and, in this context, indirect aggressive behaviour involved acts of aggression against impartial objects, such as throwing, slamming, breaking or robbing someone's objects or belongings, and was generally associated with males ^[133]. In 1988, however, a Finnish team expanded the concept of indirect aggression and drew the distinction between merely physical and verbal face-to-face incidences and aggression occurring behind an individual's back ^[137]. Subsequently, they conceptualised indirect aggression and/or bullying as a means in which:

'... the aggressor may remain unidentified, thereby avoiding both counterattack from the target and disapproval from others' ^[137].

A defining feature of indirect aggression is that the harm is inflicted in a circuitous manner possibly through the use of a third party, and it is described as covert because there is a lack any direct confrontation between the person(s) being bullied and those doing the bullying ^[138]. As such, a key characteristic of indirect aggressive behaviours involves the cunning 'social manipulation' of the peer group as an instrument to inflict harm on the target person, so that the instigators are neither personally involved in the attack, nor are they identifiable ^[82; 138; 139]. Examples of indirect aggression include gossiping, making up stories to get someone in trouble, and sending abusive notes to encourage others to exclude them from the group. Equally, examples of physical, indirect aggression include encouraging others to destroy someone's personal belongings or to rob them. The extreme covert nature of these behaviours regardless of their form is nevertheless stressed ^[140].

Relational Aggression: Following on from early research into indirect aggression, Crick and Grotpeter ^[141] introduced the concept of 'relational aggression', which they defined as:

'... behaviours that harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion' ^[135]

The emphasis in relational aggression and bullying is not so much on the form in which it takes, but rather on the deliberate intention to damage a person's peer relationships or social standing, and ultimately cause social exclusion ^[142]. Consequently, relational aggression can be covert or overt. Examples of relational aggression and bullying include playing practical jokes, teasing and embarrassing a person, imitating them behind their backs, breaking secrets, criticising their clothes or personalities, spreading hurtful rumours, sending abusive notes, whispering, and/or maliciously excluding them ^[32; 128]. While those doing the bullying may silently ignore the person being bullied, equally they may manipulate them by openly stating that they will exclude them from the peer group, unless they do what they want ^[111]. Thus while there is much overlap between the behaviours linked to indirect and relational aggression, contrary to the view of indirect aggression researchers ^[143], relational aggression researchers maintain that the concepts and motives underlying the behaviours are distinctly different, and need to be clearly understood in order to develop effective preventative programs ^[135].

Social Aggression: Although the term social aggression was first coined by Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson and Gariepy in 1989 ^[144], it was Galen and Underwood ^[130] who further expanded upon the concept of relational aggression, suggesting that it should include non-confrontational attributes that can contribute to ostracising, demeaning and reducing someone's self-esteem and peer group status. Hence, they defined social aggression as a behaviour which is:

'...directed towards damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take the forms such as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion' ^[130]

Social aggression encompasses the behaviours of both indirect and relational aggression. Galen and Underwood suggested that, in addition, frequently acts involving facial and body expressions (such as eye-rolling, turning one's back on a person, using negative body language and obscene gestures) and/or ignoring them, although more subtle, can over time damage a person's self-esteem, demean them, decrease their peer group status and ultimately cause social isolation ^[130: 145-147]. Xie, Swift, Cairns and Cairns ^[148] further expanded on this definition of social aggression, suggesting that it should incorporate only 'actions that cause interpersonal damage and are achieved by non-confrontational and largely concealed methods that employ the social community' (p. 206), and hence involve primarily indirect, covert forms of bullying. Moreover, they sought to distinguish this form of aggression from what they referred to as 'direct relational aggression', involving behaviours that damage a child's friendships and feelings of inclusion. As Archer and Coyne ^[111] point out, the important notion that Xie et al. highlight in drawing this distinction, is whether the behaviour occurs in a dyad or within a larger social group. If it occurs in a dyad, then the motive of the bullying is merely to control the other person's behaviour, whereas when it occurs within a larger social context, the underlying aim is to manipulate the person's social status or to socially exclude them.

So what do these definitions tell us about covert bullying and how it is manifest among young people today? A common and universal stereotype is that boys are more overtly aggressive, while girls have a tendency to use more indirect covert means ^[149]. From an evolutionary perspective, the concept of physical aggression has been seen primarily as a male act to assert their physical dominance, and superior size and strength, which occurs where there are few moral restraints or rules of law ^[111]. For females, however, it has been argued that the costs of direct physical aggression are much higher than for males. On the one hand, it has been suggested that girls tend to be weaker physically so they incur a physical cost ^[150]. On the other hand it has been suggested that girls are more frequently and consistently punished for direct physical aggression ^[151]. As such, it argued that they have adopted indirect and relational aggression as alternative strategies ^[152]. Similarly, studies have suggested that girls typically value close social interaction more than boys ^[137; 144] and thus, in addition to the social and physical adjustment that girls have made to conform to society's expectations of them as 'nice' ^[133], there is also

an innate gender issue that makes females more inclined towards more indirect and relational forms of bullying ^[141]. Early studies of gender differences in indirect and relational aggression confirmed these initial views and found that both forms of aggression occur more frequently in girls than in boys ^[141; 153; 154].

Nevertheless, recent studies have found that gender differences may not be as substantial as once presumed ^[140; 155-158]. It has been suggested that social contextual factors play a far more important role than gender in defining how children express and deal with their peer relationships ^[5; 149] and hence that definitions of indirect and relational aggression and bullying should be viewed from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory ^[159], considering how children and adolescents view themselves in their home-school-community settings ^[136]. This raises an important question which introduces a new perspective, namely "how do children and adolescents define 'covert' within their different social contexts?" In the definitions of indirect, relational and social aggression outlined above, covert is described as a situation in which the person who is the instigator of the bullying hides behind the group ^[139] to maximise their effect-to-danger ratio ^[109]. Within this context, bullying is only truly covert if the person being bullied is unaware of their aggressor. Nevertheless, as a large study of seventh graders illustrated, only in 9% of all cases of indirect and relational bullying were young people totally unaware of those who were involved in bullying them ^[148]. In other words, in the vast majority of cases (over 90% of the time) the students knew their aggressors' identity. Furthermore, by restricting the definition of covert bullying to include only bullying behaviour that is totally 'disguised' negates the research that demonstrates bullying is not only more likely to occur if bystanders or on lookers are present, but also that the peer group plays a crucial role in actively reinforcing aggression ^[160-165].

On the contrary, early findings emerging from the current study of children's and adolescents' definitions of covert bullying has highlighted that they have tended to define 'covert', as including any bullying behaviour that is out of sight or 'hidden' from parents, teachers, and other respected groups. From this perspective, most of the behaviours linked to indirect, relational and social aggression, outlined in Table 2.1, could be viewed as covert, as long as the behaviour remains either unwitnessed, or unaddressed, by an adult.

This latter point is significant. Research indicates increasingly that teachers and parents are more likely to intervene in cases of physical rather than relational and social bullying ^[83; 110; 114; 115; 117; 166]. Consequently, young people will progressively adopt these latter forms of bullying as a means of maximising their effect-to-danger ratio, because they will assume that when school personnel and parents either ignore or dismiss such behaviours, they are either unaware of their bullying and hence that it is hidden ^[167], or that the behaviour is acceptable or at least tolerated ^[119]. Either way, those involved in bullying others will view it as a more subtle means of exerting their power, that is more likely to be condoned by adults ^[112]. Meanwhile, those who are bullied will feel less empowered, and will be less likely to tell a teacher or adult, as they will feel that the adults will be less willing to protect them ^[83; 112; 118].

Building on this research, that suggests covert bullying involves any form of bullying behaviour that is out of sight of or unacknowledged by adults within the home, school and broader community, we surmise that its key attributes include:

- A power imbalance;
- The repeated manipulation of peer social relations;
- An intention to inflict pain and anguish;
- A lack of empathy and compassion for those being bullied; and
- The ability to go “unnoticed” and for those bullying to enmesh their behaviour in a culture of acceptance.

For the purpose of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS), covert bullying has been broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is ‘hidden’, out of sight of, or unacknowledged by, adults. Covert bullying includes behaviours linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression, including bullying by means of technology where the bullying behaviour is either unwitnessed, or not addressed, by an adult.

Table 2.1: Forms of Aggression Related to Covert Bullying

Form	Definition	Themes	Linked behaviours
Indirect Aggression	A skilful form of indirect behaviour, which involves manipulating or making use of others to inflict harm, so the person doing the bullying remains unidentified, thereby avoiding counterattack.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circuitous harm • Social manipulation of peer group • Use of third party • Peer relationships • Socially sophisticated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spreading of rumours • Sending abrasive notes • Encouraging others to exclude a person from the group • Making up stories to get someone in trouble • Encouraging others to pick on, destroy or rob a person
Relational Aggression	A more direct (frequently verbal) form of unfriendly covert behaviour aimed at damaging, or threatening to damage, peer relations, friendships, and social standing, as a means of inflicting harm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social exclusion • Manipulation and disruption of relationships • Overt and covert aggression • Peer rejection • Peer victimisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making fun of a person and playing practical jokes on a person • Teasing and embarrassing a person • Imitating/criticising a person behind their backs • Breaking secrets • Criticising a person's clothes and/or personalities • Gossiping and whispering • Maliciously excluding a person • Calling a person names • Throwing things at a person
Social Aggression	A more subtle, non-confrontational (generally non-verbal) form of covert behaviour, aimed at intimidating a person and damaging their self-esteem, so as to over time reduce their group status and cause social isolation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-verbal aggression • Intimidation • Hidden intentions • Minimal retaliation • Disruption to social status • Lowering of self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye rolling • Turning one's back on a person • Negative body language • Weird or threatening looks • Ignoring or silent treatment • Obscene gestures

A further aspect of using the peer group as a method of bullying is the opportunity for rapid transmission of emotions and behaviours through a crowd, diffusing the level of individual responsibility^[184], so that each member feels less responsible for the victimisation, a process referred to as 'social contagion'^[185]. This has the added advantage that if the aggressive act is carried out by a single peer, the person bullied may feel that it is just that particular person who does not like him/her, whereas if the entire group engages in the activity, the person being bullied is likely to feel that everyone hates him/her and that this is due to his/her own personal failings^[139]. So there is a tendency for people who are bullied to blame themselves and to internalise the problem, making them less likely to retaliate or tell an adult^[139].

The question of why other members of the group participate appears to be related to their need to belong and their fear of being excluded^[186; 187]. For example, while many students may not agree with bullying^[188; 189], most students fail to support the person being bullied^[190]. Studies of adolescent cliques suggest that while clique members may not believe the rumours they are told, their main reason for going along with it is for fear of exclusion^[191]. As Garandean and Cillessen^[139] suggest, bullying in this way becomes like following a trend, a 'fashionable' thing to do, making them look good and reinforcing their sense of belonging. Contrary to popular belief that the role of groups is to maintain cohesion among individual members, and hence bullying might be a way of excluding those who jeopardise the group's homogeneity, a study of 15 year old girls in Australia^[192] found that even when a person who was bullied left the school, and hence no longer posed a threat, malicious rumours were spread to the new school. It has been suggested, therefore, that dysfunctional groups, with a high level of imbalance of power among members, are far more likely to use covert, manipulative forms of bullying^[192].

Two implications emerge from these findings with regard to the role of peer group manipulation in covert bullying. The first is that given growing evidence on the developmental trajectory towards greater use of covert and manipulative forms of bullying in line with the improvement of children's language skills^[193], and other social-cognitive capabilities^[139; 169; 170], it would appear appropriate for preventative programs to place particular emphasis on targeting covert bullying in middle to late primary and early secondary school years. The second implication is that while, to date, such bullying prevention interventions have been aimed at developing concern and empathy among witnesses and the broader school for those who are bullied^[189; 194], this may not be enough^[139]. Particularly today with new mechanisms, such as cyber bullying, the ability of the person(s) doing the bullying to remain 'invisible' to teachers and parents should not be underestimated. Additionally, it may be necessary to teach students about how group mechanisms work, the motives of bullying, and how they are drawn in to this process, to prevent peers from conforming to the behaviours of those who are initiating the bullying^[139]. Such an approach would help students feel more conscious of the pressures exerted on them and would increase their social responsibility^[164; 195].

2.5 Individual student factors associated with covert bullying

Within the social context of covert bullying as a developmental, peer group process, it has been suggested that those children who are bullied are merely the by-product of group function, either because they are different ^[196], they have low social status and self-esteem and are easy to target ^[191], or alternatively because they have high social status and are perceived as a threat ^[197]. While bullying is widespread and occurs to some extent and in some form in all schools, it does not occur in all peer groups all of the time. The question that emerges is, therefore, “what are the particular social factors and configurations that are likely to contribute to a person being bullied and what impact does each of these factors have on the individuals involved?”

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model ^[159], it is important to assess the factors affecting the individuals who are bullied and those doing the bullying within their micro, meso, and macro environments, which in this context is influenced by their home-school-community settings ^[21]. The focus in this section is on the individual factors associated with those who are bullied and those who do the bullying. However, studies have also clearly demonstrated that the actions of peers, teachers and other adults at school, as well as the physical characteristics of school grounds, family factors, cultural factors including race and ethnicity, and even community factors can also serve to reduce or enhance and maintain covert bullying. For school administrators and teachers, it is important to understand the complex interplay between these different variables.

Prior to reviewing the key characteristics of those children who are bullied and those who bully others, an important issue that Garandeau and Cillessen ^[139] have highlighted is that in each school class there are rarely more than one or two children who are bullied. This has served to reinforce the notion that the person who is being bullied must have done something wrong, or possesses some negative personality traits that encourages the rest of the group to reject them, resulting in lack of empathy on the part of the group towards them and the ‘illusion of the single target’ ^[198]. For example, it has commonly been argued that both covert and overt bullying are selectively directed at certain children who tend to be anxious, cautious, sensitive, with low self-esteem ^[199], or who are considered by the group to have ‘unattractive’ physical ^[200-202], behavioural ^[203; 204], or social-cultural ^[39] features, such as obesity, physical disability, arrogance, or who belong to a different ethnic group. On the contrary, it has been argued that in the case of relational aggression and covert bullying, the person who is initiating the bullying is likely to feel more protected if there is only one person being bullied. This is because if several members of the class were collectively being attacked they would feel more empathy towards the person being bullied and would be more likely to support them, so it is in their best interest to target only one person ^[139]. Thus while there may be several potential targets in each group, typically only one is bullied, making it harder to clearly identify characteristics of the persons being bullied, since these will vary depending on the individual

group dynamics and overall environment. From this perspective, instead of attempting to identify key characteristics of those individuals who are bullied, it may be more important to identify the key potential impacts associated specifically with covert bullying and how these manifest in males and females at different ages, so as to identify warning signs and develop preventative and early intervention programs.

Although covert bullying is considered indirect in its action, it is direct in its effectiveness and has been shown to cause considerable distress and psychological harm to both boys and girls [21; 66; 85-89]. Studies have indicated that covert, relational bullying is more strongly related to emotional distress than overt, physical bullying [205] and has been found to be predictive of both current [32; 47; 112; 128] and future [32] social and psychological maladjustment as well as depression in adulthood [26; 128]. Social exclusion has been demonstrated to be the worst form of bullying [92]. In extreme forms it has been linked to suicide [206]. In middle childhood, those who are bullied through indirect covert bullying tend to have higher levels of depression, loneliness, peer rejection and anxiety [30; 32; 128; 207]. Cross-sectional studies of relational aggression and covert bullying have suggested a developmental trajectory towards problematic eating patterns, self-harm, borderline personality disorder and attention deficit problems [135; 208; 209].

Since the early 1990s, a great deal of attention has been attached to gender differences between type, intensity, onset and impact of covert bullying [5; 127; 176; 182]. Most of the early studies concluded that from the age of 11 and continuing through adolescence, girls engaged in covert bullying far more frequently than boys [137; 138; 141; 153]. Moreover, it was argued that because of girls' close knit friendships, in small groups, where they readily exchange intimate details and personal secrets [151; 181], indirect aggression and covert bullying tends to cause far greater emotional distress [141]. By comparison boys tend to socialise in larger groups and share less details [151; 181]. Studies have also suggested that relational aggression and covert bullying are more closely associated with social adjustment problems in girls [208-210]. Longitudinal studies have suggested that girls generally internalise problems and emotions associated with relationally aggressive behaviour [211-213] leading to depression and anxiety, while boys are more likely to externalise problems, resulting in physically aggressive, delinquent and impulsive conduct, which can cause them to bully others [214; 215]. Yet, a more recent study that tracked the relationship between internalising symptoms and relational aggression over time showed no difference between genders [176].

It appears that covert bullying can be equally harmful for both girls and boys, and in both genders is associated with internalising problems in late primary and early secondary school years. While some studies have tended to emphasise the predominance of covert bullying among girls, based on social, physical, and even intellectual grounds, as well its capacity to inflict greater harm on girls, other studies have questioned and indeed demonstrated that boys 'catch up' with girls in early secondary school [155; 216-218] – a process that has been reinforced by the growth in modern information and communication technology [98; 219]. While age seems to be a key factor, with secondary school students using relational aggression and covert forms of bullying more frequently than primary school students [155], few gender differences appear to have been found in the extent to which relational aggression and covert bullying is

used ^[21; 155]. On the contrary, what these studies have indicated is that while boys tend to use physical bullying and aggression more than girls, they do not necessarily use covert bullying any less frequently than do girls ^[149]. The major difference between genders is that for girls, holding social knowledge equates to holding social power as a means of manipulating their peers, while boys tend to use 'rational-appearing aggression' ^[109] to assist them to disguise their manipulation of the situation. Rational-appearing aggression can include interrupting, criticising, unfairly judging others and questioning others' judgement, and is a form of aggression which can be presented as being ostensibly rational and concealed as not being aggressive at all ^[220]. Both mechanisms have the same ultimate outcome ^[111]. In other words, both girls and boys rate social aggression and covert bullying as worse than physical aggression and bullying ^[146; 205], and studies have shown it to be strongly linked to depression ^[122], anxiety ^[149] and low self-esteem ^[221] in both genders.

While gender differences have been the focus of the majority of studies, it may be that gender similarities are equally significant in understanding covert bullying ^[222]. As Berger ^[125] points out, most children avoid bullying, thus not only do young people who are bullied encounter social, emotional, academic and health-related problems, equally it has been found that those young people who are involved in bullying tend to have a variety of social, emotional and other problems. On the surface, although indirectly aggressive children may appear to have many positive traits, including being viewed as popular, socially intelligent, and less likely to be lonely ^[111], Werner and Crick ^[223] have suggested that the long term use of indirect aggressive behaviour is frequently associated with serious social and psychological difficulties. In the case of women, associations have been drawn with peer rejection, anti-social behaviour, identity problems, self harm behaviour, lower overall life satisfaction, depression, and bulimia ^[111; 224]. Meanwhile in men, it has been associated with peer rejection, injury, addiction and crime ^[125].

A number of important implications emerge from the findings of these studies into individual factors contributing to covert bullying. One is the need for schools and parents to be aware of the developmental trajectory of relational aggression and covert bullying. While overt aggression in younger years may not necessarily be a 'gateway' to covert bullying, there does appear to be some correlation between the two ^[155]. Furthermore, it appears that covert bullying increases in frequency starting in late primary school years among girls ^[225] and early secondary school years among boys ^[149], as overt physical aggression decreases ^[62], and as children renegotiate their dominance in new relationships during school transition years ^[226]. The second implication is that as both girls and boys in late primary and early secondary school years find covert bullying to be particularly hurtful, this schooling period would appear to be a particularly appropriate time to implement intervention strategies. Current interventions offer some indications of effectiveness, including efforts to train youth regarding appropriate sharing of intimate information and knowledge with friends, as well as more positive ways to use leadership skills among those involved in bullying ^[225; 227]. Thirdly, there is need for more research and training in the recognition of the different gender related symptoms, both of those being bullied and those involved in covert bullying, to improve parents' and teachers' knowledge, attitudes and abilities to make a difference, so that young people feel they are being heard and can seek and find effective support from adults ^[225; 227].

2.6 The impact of the school on covert bullying

Although some covert bullying, particularly cyber bullying, occurs outside the school environment, and, arguably, is not directly the responsibility of schools, it can later escalate and be played out in the form of more aggressive covert and overt acts during school hours. From this perspective, another important aspect in understanding and ultimately addressing covert bullying is to review the way school personnel and teachers perceive and react to episodes of covert bullying, since they are one of the major 'moral agents', or figureheads, providing daily input into students' moral development ^[228]. Nevertheless, as mentioned elsewhere in this review, research suggests that many students place little faith in either their teachers' or in other school personnel's empathy with their problems or in their ability to intervene effectively ^[112; 115-117]. A study of 9-11 year olds in the Netherlands found that, of those children who were bullied, only 53% told their teachers. According to the students who told their teachers they were being bullied, the majority of teachers tried to stop the bullying (88%). Students reported that teachers were successful in their attempts to stop the bullying in only 49% of cases, whereas in 34% of cases their teachers' attempts to stop the bullying made no difference and in 16% of cases the bullying actually got worse ^[229]. A similar US study with elementary school children found that, particularly among boys, teacher intervention backfired, exacerbating the situation ^[230]. A study of UK adolescents indicated that students felt they could gain greater support from talking to a peer than to an adult ^[22]. An Australian study found that almost one half of 14 year olds thought teachers were not empathetic to their needs and thought telling a teacher was not a good idea, and a quarter thought talking to teachers would make matters worse ^[231]. Recent findings show teachers consider relational aggression and covert bullying to be less serious than overt bullying and are less likely to intervene ^[83; 117]. This is particularly concerning in light of the emerging trend towards covert bullying ^[108], as well as the serious present and future impact it has on all involved.

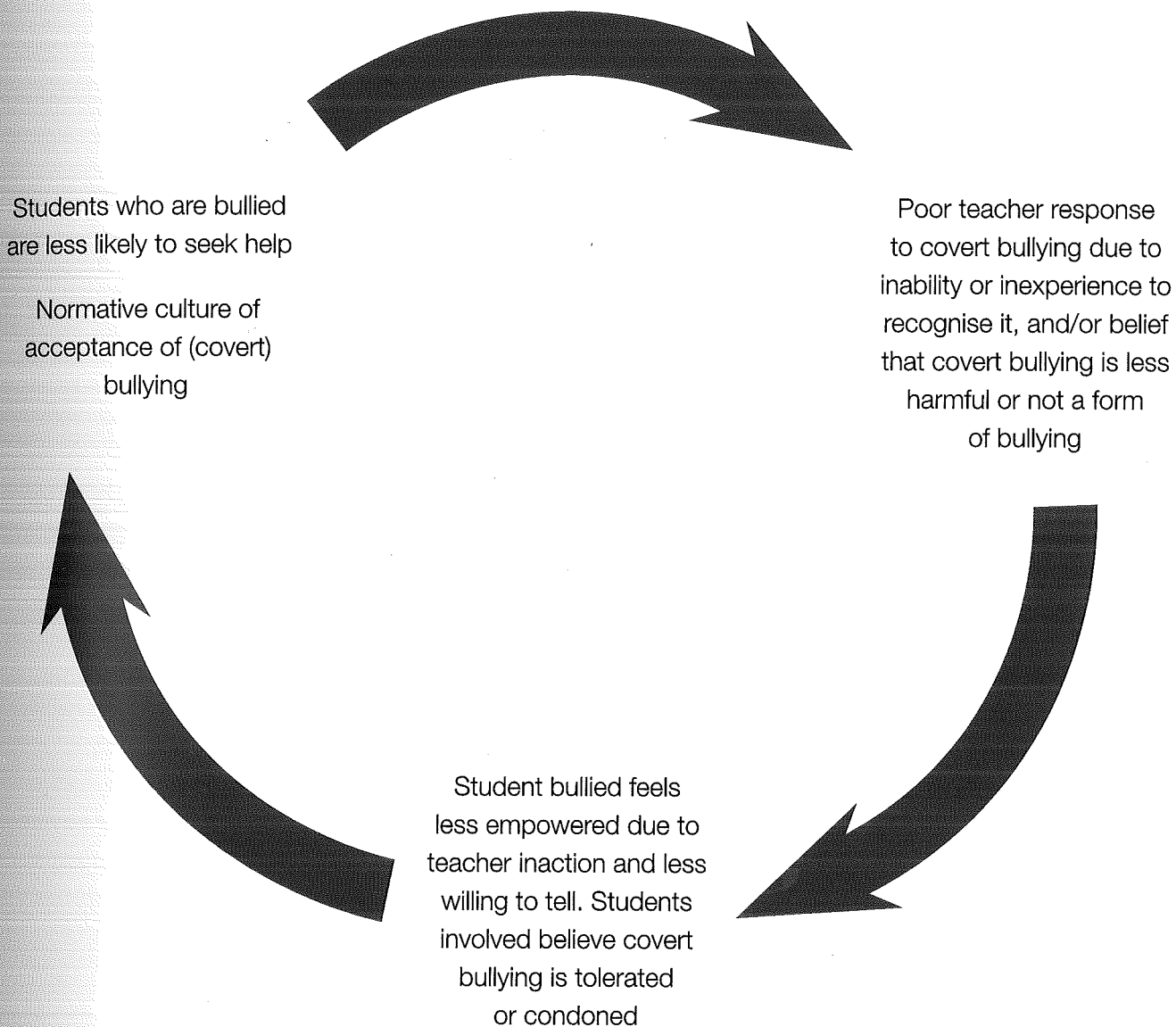
Bauman and Del Rio ^[83] suggested that teachers' discomfort with ambiguity may be a factor in their lack of intervention in the case of covert bullying. They argued that, with regards to overt, physical and verbal bullying, many schools have clear, standard policies and courses of action for teachers and school personnel to follow. Covert bullying, by its very nature, is difficult to detect and hence is less likely to be outlined clearly in policy guidelines. Thus, if teachers witness a student being continually excluded, they are likely to be unaware of the best course of action to take, and may feel that their intervention will cause further ostracising of the excluded child. Equally, if a rumour has been spread, the damage may already be done. If the harm inflicted by covert bullying actions are not directly observable, and must be inferred as a result of the behaviour of the person who is being bullied, or by the teacher's subjective judgement, the school personnel may feel less confident to intervene. The combination of a lack of clear

policies and information on appropriate action, and insecurity on the part of teachers who are continually under scrutiny, is likely to be a major barrier to the success of anti-covert bullying programs^[120].

Similarly, there is a general perception that covert bullying and relational aggression is normative behaviour among adolescents^[120; 232]. This has contributed to reluctance by teachers to respond^[192]. Just as it has been argued that some children are more likely to be the target of bullying because they are in some way different from their peer group, it has also been suggested that teachers may find some children less appealing and may resist intervening. As Elias and Zins^[233] noted, adolescents who are involved in covert, relational bullying often hold high status not only with their peers but also with their teachers, as they are often good at sports, better looking, with strong social and leadership skills. While most students have at some time been involved in bullying and/or been bullied, bullying is not a personality trait but a response to circumstances^[234]. Students with a good understanding of social situations, but who lack empathy, will find that covert bullying works well in schools that do not take a stance to confront it. Before implementing effective school-based programs aimed at preventing covert bullying, it is therefore essential to first look at how teachers are currently intervening and the impact this is having.

As the Bauman and Del Rio^[83] study found, teachers' responses illustrated a basic misunderstanding of the nature of covert bullying. Comments were noted such as telling the child "not to be sad" or trying to boost the child's self esteem by giving them some form of reward. This not only negates the fact that adult attention cannot compensate for peer rejection at a time in young people's development when being part of a peer group is essential, it can also promote jealousy and lead to further retaliation on the part of peers. Similarly, teachers' efforts to console and minimise a bullying incidence with comments like, "I don't think he really meant what he said", or to rationalise the bullying behaviour by saying, "I wonder why she said such a thing, maybe she is feeling grumpy or upset today", while well intentioned, not only excuses the behaviour, but also reinforces the notion that the person being bullied cannot expect support from their teacher. Also, comments like, "don't worry, there are plenty of other people to be friends with" shows a lack of understanding of the feelings of the person who is being bullied, and the degree to which they may be socially isolated. This cycle of inaction to address covert bullying is shown in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Cycle of inaction to address covert bullying



Thus, to be effective, school bullying prevention programs need to include policies and actions for dealing with covert as well as overt bullying [83; 120]. As teachers are integral to the successful implementation of this process, it is essential that both pre-service and in-service teachers' training includes a review of their attitudes towards bullying and how those attitudes relate to their in-classroom and school yard responses to students [235]. At the same time, training should provide them with the confidence and skills to recognise and deal with covert bullying [83]. Pre-service training programs provide an ideal setting for enhancing these skills [78], however it is also argued that such training be extended to in-service school personnel, including pastoral care staff, and others such as school bus drivers.

Nevertheless, due to its covert nature, it is unreasonable to expect teachers and school personnel to recognise and respond appropriately to all bullying episodes. As children mature they develop strategies to conceal bullying, so while it is essential for teachers to be receptive and aware of the underlying issues, there are also a number of whole school and systemic strategies that can be implemented to reduce bullying. At one level, school climate and ethos are important factors that can affect students' attitudes to bullying and aggression, and the personalities of their role models. If school staff and older peers accept and condone relational aggression, it is plausible that covert bullying will flourish [21]. While several studies have analysed school climate and its impact on student behaviour, few have specifically looked at its impact on bullying, and more specifically covert bullying. Nevertheless, some studies do demonstrate that schools which have stronger pro-social attitudes, and strong parental involvement, generally do have lower levels of bullying [21].

Equally, it has been argued that physical structures can play a role in reducing indirect, covert bullying in the classroom and playground. In the past, it has been suggested that the majority of overt, physical and verbal bullying occurs in school yards and non-classroom areas of the school, because of the unstructured nature of activities and limitations for supervision, while in the classroom children resort to indirect covert types of bullying to avoid detection [110]. Yet if we are to take children's definition of covert bullying as anything that is 'hidden' from, or 'out of sight' of, adults then, there are a number of means of reducing covert bullying in both the classroom and school yard through the adaptation of contextual features, such as: the allocation of areas for structured activities that are more open and visible; the provision of several smaller, defined spaces that can help to limit power control of preferred spots by certain groups to the exclusion of others; and the placing of teachers at the back of classroom, or in a position where they are continually moving between students so they can be more alert to covert mobile phone text messaging, indirect body language and the like. Additional strategies may include provision of safer areas where the child to teacher ratio is higher, and the wearing of brightly coloured vests by teachers to increase students' visibility of on-duty teachers in the school yard.

Another issue of interest related to the school context and levels of bullying is whether bullying is more common in single sex or co-education schools ^[236; 237]. There are suggestions that in front of a male audience, girls may feel more inclined to mask their feelings. By contrast, in front of girls, boys may receive reinforcement for assertiveness, even if not physical ^[134]. Two Australian studies ^[236; 237] have shown that girls in co-education schools are subjected to more indirect, verbal and physical bullying than those in single sex schools. The study by Delfabbro et al. also showed that boys in Government co-education schools are significantly more likely to be bullied than boys in private, single sex schools, and that they are also more likely to bully and intimidate girls in co-education schools ^[236]. These findings have reinforced previous work by Watson ^[238] that suggests all girls' schools strengthen female norms which oppose overt displays of aggression. As James and Owens ^[237] indicate, indirect and verbal bullying are more frequent in all girls' schools because the environment encourages them to comply with feminine social etiquette, while the close intimate relationships offer them an ideal opportunity to mask their aggressive intentions.

Another key issue highlighted through James' and Owens' ^[237] study was the use by adolescent girls' of conflict management, peer support, compromise and avoidance in the resolution of indirect and covert bullying, as opposed to resorting to overt angry responses, which were more prevalent in co-education schools. This reinforces the notion made previously, relating to the benefits of teaching students about group mechanisms ^[139], as well as strengthening their skills in conflict resolution ^[239].

2.7 Family and community factors associated with covert bullying

While a number of anti-bullying projects have focused on the school, the influence of family and community factors can also play a major role in how relational aggression and covert bullying are manifested. Emerging research suggests the influence of family relationships on covert bullying is similar to their influence on physical aggression and overt bullying [47; 129; 136]. Studies increasingly demonstrate a link between the role of the family and social context in the development and/or prevention of bullying among children [9; 56; 160; 240]. Significantly, Stephenson and Smith [202] found that children involved in bullying are three times more likely to have family or parental problems. Several recent studies have focused on the role of parenting styles in either implicitly or explicitly causing child behavioural problems, highlighting how poor parental supervision [241], harsh physical punishment and threats [184; 240], erratic and inconsistent discipline [9], disharmony between parents [57; 242] and authoritarian parenting [242] can contribute to a higher risk of children bullying others. Similarly, parental absence, lack of communication, or a cold or unsupportive attitude on the part of parents towards children has been found to be associated with increased bullying by male students, and higher rates of victimisation among female students [9]. Yet, there appears to be no evidence to suggest that lower levels of involvement by fathers are more significant in the bullying behaviour of sons than of daughters [243]. Alternatively, over-protective and/or over-involved parents may increase the risk of the child being bullied [242].

A number of theories have been used to explain relationships with the family and why children engage in bullying [244]. The first is based on the Social Cognitive Theory [245] and suggests that children learn or acquire aggressive behaviours through observation and imitation of parents. A second school of thought, based on the Theory of Symbolic Interaction [244], proposes that a child's self-concept is greatly influenced by how others (and particularly their parents) see them. Results of Christie-Mizell's study found that self-concept is one of the most powerful predictors of bullying behaviour among primary and middle school children [244]. The study found that at this age children appear to internalise poor parental communication and damaging home and family environments, which in turn directly and indirectly lowers their self-concept and increases bullying behaviour. Earlier studies, however, have suggested that a child's 'perception' of the level of power and cohesion within their family may be more important in influencing their behaviour, than the 'actual' nature of relations within their family [242].

Regardless of the underlying causes, research generally concurs that family relations play an important role in bullying behaviour. There are findings that authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) parents who provide children with good supervision and who set boundaries, while at the same time granting their children a level of psychological autonomy, enhance the development of protective social skills among their children, and strengthen their capacity to find creative rather than reactive solutions when resolving conflicts ^[241]. Subsequently, many studies have proposed that school based anti-bullying interventions should have a significant parent and family component to ensure that family members play an active and supportive role in school programs, and promote protective factors against bullying in their children ^[246; 247]. Studies have also found that children are more likely to talk to their parents than to teachers about being bullied, yet many parents of children who are bullied did not always know how best to talk to their children about the issue, and hence require appropriate information and support to deal with the incidence of bullying ^[229].

Extra-familiar and community factors may also increase the probability of children adopting covert bullying and relationally aggressive forms of behaviour ^[136]. Numerous studies have shown that physical violence in the media can influence subsequent aggression and desensitisation of youth ^[248-250]. Nevertheless, only recently have studies started to analyse the impact of indirect aggression and covert bullying in the media and its effects on children's behaviour ^[251; 252]. In their study, Coyne and Archer ^[251] found that 92% of all popular adolescent programs aired on British television contained indirect aggression, and they found a relationship between the amount of televised indirect aggression girls viewed and the amounts of indirect aggression they displayed.

Teachers, parents, peers and the media can all influence and shape the social network in which children grow up and provide them with cues on what is acceptable behaviour. As with overt bullying there is a need to raise parents', peer and other community members' awareness of short and long term problems related to covert bullying. This includes providing them with information on forms and modes it takes; how to recognise signs of covert bullying and provide a supportive, caring environment; how to employ positive conflict resolution techniques; and how to assess their own role modelling behaviour. Methods used to achieve these have included: parental awareness-raising through, for example, newsletters on school policy; parental education sessions on the subject of covert bullying; and one-on-one discussions with parents of children who have been bullied or are involved in bullying.

Notwithstanding these findings, a recent systematic review of anti-bullying interventions revealed mixed results^[77]. The review grouped studies according to curriculum only interventions, targeted interventions (aimed solely at providing social skills training to children who had been bullied or who were involved in bullying others), and multi-disciplinary, whole-school interventions, many of which included parent components. The findings demonstrated that both curriculum only and targeted interventions seldom improved any form of bullying. By contrast, those interventions that sought to alter the schools' environments, through individual, teacher, peer group and parent components were more likely to have significant positive outcomes^[77]. These findings add to the theory that bullying, in either overt or covert forms, is a socio-cultural phenomenon^[124] involving individuals, peers, school personnel and parents, as well as home, school and community environments, and as such any effort to address it must involve all these aspects.

2.8 The growth of information and communication technologies and their impact on covert bullying

One important issue that has not been discussed so far in this review is the effect of the significant growth in information and communication technologies (ICT) on covert bullying. School students today have access to a highly connected world through the internet and they are frequent and sophisticated users of many information and communication technologies including computers and mobile phones. At one end of the spectrum, technology has become the 'pen and paper' of our time, and knowledge of how to use digital and connected technology is offering young people a greatly expanded means to broaden their education and develop innovative ways to analyse, synthesise, and create new knowledge, while at the same time enhancing their peer relationships^[253; 254]. At the other end of the spectrum, the anonymous virtual nature of the technology, the lack of central control, and limitations for monitoring and supervising its use, has enabled adolescents to adopt a new and pervasive form of covert aggression^[85; 94; 98-105], referred to as 'cyber bullying'^[99], in which the location, actors, language and gestures of face-to-face bullying have evolved and moved into the virtual world^[255].

While the internet is a powerful tool with many positive attributes for education, the Australian media have recently highlighted the negative side of the internet, with stories about suicide, Columbine-style threats and concerns about harassment and bullying^[256-258]. Safety on-line is a growing concern for young people, and within this context schools, which have a legal duty of care toward their students, need to understand the attitudes and behaviour used by students in this virtual environment^[259]. Today schools use technology to deliver curriculum, assign homework and develop extra-curricular activities. As such, it is increasingly important that educational policy makers, school administrators, teachers, parents and youth become attuned to both the positive and negative interactions related to the current virtual revolution^[260].

'Cyber bullying' has been described as a particularly damaging form of psychological covert aggression that involves "...the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others..."^[99], and frequently involves "[s]ending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies"^[261, p. 1]. Early studies indicate that Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging using mobile phones is the most common medium used for cyber bullying among adolescents in Australia^[262]. Students can create personal on-line profiles (known as Xangas) where they might list classmates they do not like, or similarly they may take on anonymous, virtual personalities in Multi-User Domain (MUD) online game rooms to harass others. Alternatively, cyber bullying can take the form of enticing individuals to share secrets or photographs (emailed in confidence), that are then altered and sent to unlimited audiences once relationships sour^[101].

Consequently, with the advent of new technology, covert bullying is being transformed from 'behind the scene to behind the screen'. Verbal aggression and bullying translates easily to SMS mobile phone text messaging, e-mailing, instant messaging, and use of chat-rooms: indeed, to anywhere in which virtual text is used to communicate. In this way, the use of ICT can enable young people to inflict social isolation, exclusion, and manipulation on a much broader scale, with a significantly higher effect-to-danger ratio^[263; 264]. For instance, mobile phone technology now makes it extremely easy to photograph a person (such as a child in a changing room) and instantly disseminate the image via e-mail or other means within a matter of seconds to a much wider audience than merely close friends within the school or neighbourhood^[85; 87]. Only physical aggression is left out of cyber bullying, however its virtual equivalents (from open threats to virtual rape) have the potential to leave lasting psychological scars^[90; 91].

Cyber bullying may be rooted in the same problem as other forms of covert bullying, with some researchers questioning whether it is an 'old problem in new guise'^[94; 265], yet there are ways that this technology can be used which raise a very different set of issues for schools and parents to deal with. Traditionally, educational institutions have played a pivotal role in producing a positive influence on societal progress. This is achieved by providing in young people the academic capacity to address emerging challenges, while at the same time nurturing in them pastoral care social values to become civic minded individuals^[266]. While pedagogical and legal policies, like the National Safe Schools Framework, have assisted in creating positive, supportive environments for the reduction of face-to-face bullying that occurs on school grounds, the virtual nature of cyber bullying means it may occur both within the school environment or off-campus, blurring the boundaries for supervision and responsibility, and introducing a number of unprecedented legal and educational concerns for schools^[103; 255; 259; 267]. For example, questions have been raised about the extent to which schools can be expected to intervene when cyber bullying occurs off-campus, outside of school hours, and/or from home computers^[103; 268] and current legal boundaries regarding freedom of expression, student privacy, and protection of cyberspace remain unsolved^[102-104]. The nebulous nature of cyber bullying, together with the lack of clarity regarding legal boundaries has, until recently, led to school administrators and teachers putting up a 'wall of defence' absolving them from doing anything to protect those who are bullied through such means^[269].

Despite the past 'hands off' approach adopted by schools, increasing numbers of students are today using school internet systems either during school hours, or after school activities, or even from their homes, as a means of cyber bullying. In other cases, students' personal digital devices, such as: mobile phones, digital cameras, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and personal computers are used in school grounds to engage in bullying ^[270]. Studies have also indicated that covert aggression initiated off-campus through malicious SMS mobile phone text messaging, instant messaging and other digital means can later be played out in the form of overt and/or covert bullying at school ^[271; 272]. In response to the potential risk of litigation cases against schools and education departments, recently there has been a growing recognition on the part of principals to develop new policies to address the issue and to provide students with a cyber safe environment ^[273]. However, 'knee jerk' responses have been made by some schools to enforce blanket zero-tolerance policies regarding technology. While well-intentioned, these have ignored the root problem and overlooked the systemic and generational barriers, serving only to further marginalise those children most in need of support, while perpetuating the cycle of bullying and cyber bullying ^[98]. Similarly, efforts by parents to restrict their children's use of technology or to set online filters have had limited outcomes, and in some cases may have exacerbated the problem ^[274]. While such approaches have been justified by the desire to enhance student safety and remove distractions from learning, in practice, they have tended to blame 'technology' for behaviour that is rooted in wider social problems and in the psychological issues that characterise adolescence.

Rather than restricting access to new technology, perhaps schools should be developing holistic methods that build on the substantial positive benefits that can be brought about through the ICT revolution, by enhancing collaborative learning experiences and social interaction using these mechanisms in the classroom ^[275]. Like efforts to deal with other forms of covert bullying, this would include the introduction of school policies that: foster inclusive and positive codes of conduct with respect to the use of digital technology; assist youth to define acceptable boundaries for student relations in cyberspace; and encourage young people to develop moral and behavioural values that reduce cyber bullying and enhance cyber safety ^[103; 259; 260; 276]. The development of such policies, however, is dependent on a sound understanding of: how cyber bullying differs from other forms of overt and covert bullying; the barriers and misconceptions that have enabled cyber bullying to flourish; the importance of the virtual environment in the development of social networks for young people; and the developmental psychology of adolescence and how virtual communications affect the way in which youth today construct their personal identities, attitudes, and values.

Early research indicates that Australia is a global leader in SMS mobile phone text messaging, with mobile phones being the most common medium used for cyber bullying among adolescents in Australia ^[262]. A study conducted by the Australian Psychological Society in 2004, indicated that 83% of Year 7 to 12 students had a mobile phone, with 61% using their phone at least once per day ^[277]. Data also indicates that SMS mobile phone text messaging has increased exponentially with about 500 million SMS messages being sent each month in 2004, as opposed to only 10 million in 2000 ^[278]. Today

the figure is likely to be significantly higher. Equally, the use of internet is increasing. In 2006, 64% of Australian households had home internet access ^[279], while our current survey has shown that in 2008 this figure is closer to 90%. As access to ICT increases, it is predicted the incidence of cyber bullying will also rise, with a Brisbane study reporting that over one half of the students questioned felt that cyber bullying was growing ^[262].

International research has demonstrated that both male and female adolescents are increasingly using digital technology in covert bullying ^[22; 219; 235; 280; 281] as a means of enhancing the effect-to-danger ratio ^[85; 91; 95]. Nevertheless early research in this area tends to concur that girls use cyber bullying as a means to exert relational aggression to demean and exclude others from their peer groups through verbal gossip and threatening ^[282; 283], while boys are more likely to use it to impose sexual harassment ^[98], through the use of confrontational language in homophobic bullying of male peers and increased sexual harassment of females ^[274; 283]. This latter form of gender-based cyber bullying can take the form of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, cyber stalking, and sexual coercion ^[284]. To achieve these outcomes, the young aggressor(s) hide behind the anonymity of fictitious screen names, or 'avatars' which they alter regularly ^[267], creating a lack of inhibition, referred to as 'disinhibition' ^[285]. Willard ^[286] identified a number of characteristics of the virtual world that have facilitated disinhibition, one being the illusion of invisibility, while the second is the lack of visual and aural contact with the individuals being bullied. This means that participants and on-lookers rarely witness the pain inflicted and are less likely to feel sympathy or compassion for the person being bullied, with adolescents justifying the use of cyber bullying for fun ^[85].

Evidence also suggests that young people who bully others using digital technology can be motivated to continually apply more severe methods of intimidation, starting with SMS mobile phone text messaging, followed by chat rooms, and then e-mail ^[95; 267; 287], leading aggressors into a developmental pathway of anti-social behaviour in technology use ^[95; 263; 264; 267; 272; 273; 287]. Research also indicates that students who are bullied by others in the schoolyard and other 'real' environments often feel more comfortable communicating online, and are significantly more likely (51%) to engage in cyber bullying as a means of retaliating against serious conventional bullying ^[91]. Therefore, it is recommended that educators, parents and policy makers need to be careful in their handling of cyber bullying, so as not to further alienate young people who are victimised by conventional bullying behaviour ^[261]. In their extensive study, Ybarra and Mitchell ^[288] revealed that adolescents who are lonely, socially isolated, who have high levels of conflict with their parents, and/or misuse legal or illegal drugs are more likely to engage in on-line harassment behaviour. While similarly, Wolak, Mitchell and Finkhor ^[289] found that young people with poor parent relationships, delinquency, low self-esteem, and psychosocial challenges are likely to seek more online behaviour increasing their vulnerability to online exploitation.

To date information on the incidence of cyber bullying is limited, with national and international research studies focusing on small and localised populations of young people. For example, a survey of 120 Year 8 students in Australia indicated that over one quarter knew someone who had been bullied using mobile phones, while a further 11% admitted they had cyber bullied and 14% revealed they were targets of bullying ^[287]. Similarly, a US study of 1500 adolescents indicated one in three young people studied had been cyber bullied, while a further 16.7% of those surveyed identified themselves as someone who cyber bullies others, with over half of those surveyed justifying using cyber bullying for fun ^[85]. A UK study revealed that one in four young people aged 11 to 19 years reported being bullied via the internet or mobile phone ^[95]; and a further UK study of 92 participants ^[290] found that cyber bullying was becoming increasingly prevalent, with phone, text messages, and email the most common forms. A recent survey from Alberta, Canada, disclosed that 23% of middle school students were bullied by e-mail, 35% in chat rooms, and 41% by mobile phone ^[265]. Of these Canadian students, 32% were bullied by known school mates, 11% were bullied by people outside their school, and 16% were bullied via multiple sources ^[265]. A study of electronic bullying in rural Ontario ^[291], highlighted the distinct form which cyber bullying takes and its differences from traditional playground bullying, indicating that as many females as males participate, whether by bullying others, being bullied, or as on-lookers. The study also suggested that this form of bullying could have a greater impact on those being bullied due to the intrusiveness of the bullying outside of school hours and the potential widespread dissemination of some forms of electronic bullying.

Likewise, a survey of 2,027 eleven and twelve year olds attending Western Australian Catholic schools found that almost 10% had been sent hurtful messages on the internet during the past school term, with the figure being as high as 12.5% among girls ^[292]. Similar data from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre's (CHPRC) Survey Service (collected from secondary schools across Australia in 2005 and 2006) indicates that 13% of the 1286 students participating in the survey had received hurtful messages using SMS mobile phone text messaging, while 15% had received hurtful messages through the internet. Nevertheless, figures emerging from the current national study of covert bullying, suggest average levels of cyber bullying across Australia are approximately 7-10%, which is still significantly below that of other developed nations. This provides the opportunity to take positive preventative action in Australia before the problem escalates.

Despite young people's increasing access to technology and the growing public concern for solutions to this pervasive problem there has been slow progress to date in the development of effective preventative initiatives to address cyber bullying. Contributing factors are: the current legal policy vacuum ^[259], schools' restrictive approaches; and teachers' and parents' general lack of knowledge and understanding of how adolescents use digital technology to communicate and form social networks. Research on how best to intervene to prevent and reduce the impact of technology in relational aggression is virtually absent. Generational differences and lack of parental connectedness have, in part, been blamed for the dearth of evidence-based interventions, with teachers and parents still viewing digital technology as a practical tool, while Australian adolescents increasingly see it as an essential part of their social life and interaction

with peers' [267; 293]. As a Brisbane study showed, many Year 8 students believe that adults have no knowledge that they have on-line lives [287], while other studies indicated that almost half of students who were bullied using technology told nobody, for fear of having their computers or mobile phones taken away from them, creating further isolation [85; 95].

A significant issue faced by schools, parents and other care-givers is to understand the perceptions young people have of their on-line activities, as well as the risks inherent in such activities. This is particularly relevant as the generation who currently make policy decisions has had (for the most part) no experience of the internet themselves as children and adolescents. This is an issue compounded by the speed of technological change and the corresponding shifts in the culture and activity of young people. As such, the 'always on' youth culture is a new phenomenon that does not always match the perception of adults. Most parents are challenged to deal effectively with these problems at home. While parents, teachers and students clearly need to be made aware of the consequences of severe and continuous bullying very few evidence-based resources are available to help them. Most of the currently available resources address cyber safety issues without specifically addressing bullying [85]. However a key initiative of the Australian Government's cyber-safety plan is the newly established Consultative Working Group on Cyber Safety. The Group will examine aspects of cyber-safety that Australian children face, such as cyber bullying, identity theft and exposure to illegal and inappropriate content. The Consultative Working Group will consider the reports of its Sub-Committees and a Youth Advisory Group on cyber-safety issues for children and how to deliver effective solutions.