



# **Sammy D Foundation's Submission to the Minister's Roundtable on Violence Prevention in Schools**

**January 2023**



## 1. Why do we have violent behaviour in our schools?

### **Schools as a microcosm of their local community**

Societal attitudes and norms shape the context in which violence occurs. Young people exposed to violent behaviour, whether in the family home, the community, or at school, are at greater risk of perpetrating violence themselves. Especially if that behaviour is not challenged as being unacceptable, or worse still, is condoned as a normal and appropriate way to resolve conflict.

A study of adolescents attending South Australian High Schools (Skrzypiec 2017) reported that 1 in 4 teenagers aged between 15-18 had engaged in a violent altercation.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2020) reported that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 16 men, aged 18 and over, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15.

Our own survey in 2022 of 384 young people aged between 11 and 18, found that 61% self-reported they had previously intentionally hit (slapped, punched, or pushed) someone.

While schools and in particular school leadership, can and do play a significant role in setting and modelling positive behaviours such as empathy, respectful relationships, diversity and inclusion, and mindfulness, it needs to be recognised that violence is not an issue exclusive to schools. Schools are a microcosm of the broader community. In a community struggling with societal problems such as racism, bullying & violence, antisocial behaviour and the misuse of alcohol and other drugs, it is only natural that these issues extend into local schools.

Violence prevention needs to be inclusive of whole communities.

### **COVID 19**

Research is starting to emerge internationally about the impact of COVID 19 on the resilience of communities already dealing with high levels of stress and trauma. The subsequent disruption to social connections, a lack of access to adequate supports, and a breakdown of relationships over the past two years, is contributing to a rise of abusive and violent behaviour post pandemic.

The major disruptions to schooling over the past two years have had a significant impact on young people, especially those who were already socially isolated and or living in dysfunctional homes with a lack of external supports.

Seventy percent (70%) of respondents (aged 13-17) to a UNICEF National Survey conducted in April 2020 said the pandemic had negatively impacted their social connectedness. While this had reduced to 42% by August 2020, these levels are still significantly high (AIWH 2021). Many young people also experienced decayed family relationships and an increase in family disagreements during the pandemic.

### **Anecdotal Factors**

Over the past 12-18 months the Foundation has experienced an increase in contact from parents with concerns about bullying and violence at their school. Some recurring themes from these conversations include:

- school mergers – in particular, the merger of schools that have previously competed against one another, (ie rival schools), as well as schools with different cultures (ie different learning styles or academic focuses), and/or schools with either a real or perceived difference in public status
- transition of Year 7's into High School – in particular, the maturity of some year 7 students not being ready for high school, the number of students in large schools, and the physical size of these “super schools” leading to a lack of resources for eyes to be where they are needed
- inconsistent practices – in particular, experiencing different response across a school dependent on your child's teacher, and a real, or perceived, lack of response to concerns that have been raised (parents and students).

## **2. *What strategies are effective in responding to violence in our schools?***

### **Risk and Protective Factors**

Young people are significantly impacted by their physical, social, and emotional development, and their external environment. The more risk factors a young person is exposed to, the greater the likelihood they will develop health and social problems. Risk factors that have been linked to an increased likelihood of violence include:

- Individual risk factors such as antisocial beliefs, involvement in illegal activity, a history of aggressive behaviour, and being exposed to violence
- Educational risk factors such as schools with high levels of drug activity and antisocial behaviour, poor performance in primary school, teens who disengage from education
- Community risk factors such as substandard housing, intergenerational unemployment, low socio-economic status
- Family risk factors such as inconsistent discipline and a lack of supervision, lack of emotional attachment, parents with low incomes, low levels of education and substance mis-use issues, abuse and neglect, and stressful family environments
- Social risk factors such as associating with others involved in antisocial behaviour and low engagement in structured activities.

Programs that focus on reducing or removing risk factors and building protective factors are the most effective in responding to the issue of violence.

## **3. *How can we better prevent violence occurring in our schools?***

### **Increased focus on primary prevention**

Understanding peer dynamics and developmental trajectories is important to the success of planned prevention and intervention strategies.

Tina Malti's (2020) research on the developmental trajectory of power and aggression, identifies clear links between bullying and violence across the lifespan, that stem from childhood, evolve through adolescence, and mature in adulthood as “proactive, deliberate, negative power assertion and control”.

Most children in Malti's longitudinal study displayed low levels of, or no, violence across development. Some showed moderate to high levels that gradually decreased. A small number showed high, stable levels over time. Male/female trajectories were similar, although male aggression scores were higher, and if a decline was identified, the decline for females was sharper.

With different children following different trajectories, a tiered approach to violence prevention is required.

- a) A universal tier (primary prevention) – providing a whole of school approach (students, parents, and staff) aimed at eliminating violence before it occurs that includes:
- b) A targeted tier (secondary prevention) – providing additional supports to identified individuals to reduce the impact of violence that has already occurred and to try and prevent re-occurrences.
- c) An intensive tier (tertiary prevention) – providing tailored approaches for the management of non-responsive individuals (tertiary prevention)

The Foundation believes that the Department for Education is delivering on a number of excellent strategies focused on secondary and tertiary prevention, but more could be done in the primary prevention space.

Investment in primary prevention (being proactive rather than reactive), is more effective than trying to change entrenched attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

The Sammy D Foundation's expertise lies in the primary prevention space. As the leading violence prevention organisation in South Australia, we would recommend strategies that incorporate:

- clear expectations of behaviour, and consequences for breaches of behaviour, as well as an outline of safe and healthy practices
- education about what violence is, what contributes to a culture of violence, the impact of violence, and strategies to prevent violence
- positive behaviour modelling by adults
- consistent application of the rules and consequences.

As previously discussed in our funding proposal '*Be the Mate: a bullying and violence prevention initiative*', sent to the Minister in June 2022, we are currently seeing two trends in the bullying and violence prevention space:

- an increase in requests from schools for bullying and violence prevention programs that exceeds our current capacity to deliver
- a lack of financial resources is a leading barrier to schools booking bullying and violence prevention education programs, especially for regional and rural schools.

In response to this we proposed the following series of initiatives:

1. Be the Mate Public Awareness Campaign, developed in partnership with the Department, to raise awareness of the impacts of bullying and violence not just to the victim and perpetrator, but their families, friends, bystanders, and the broader community.

2. Pilot our revised True Colours Bullying and Violence Prevention Project – co-developed with the University of South Australia.
3. Targeted annual delivery over 4-5 years of our Impact Violence Prevention Program to identified schools across SA experiencing high rates of violent incidents, enabling a reach of the entire student body and supporting a cultural shift over this period.
4. Development of an Online Education Portal to support remote delivery of our bullying and violence prevention programs, reducing costs, especially for regional/remote schools, and ensuring regional schools have access to the same opportunities as metropolitan schools.
5. Support the formal external evaluation of our Impact Violence Prevention Program and our revised True Colours Bullying Prevention Program, contributing to the growing evidence based of best practices in bullying and violence prevention education in South Australia and nationally.

## References

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