

# Talking About Bullying

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**B**ullying, disablism, harassment, abuse, mobbing – these are all terms used for actions and words that hurt and belittle other people. Bullying is reported to occur everywhere, but appears to be more often experienced by people with disability (Christensen et al. 2012; McGrath et al, 2010). Up to two-thirds of people with intellectual disability have been bullied at some time, both as children and as adults. People with intellectual disability are sometimes the ones doing the bullying.

Bullying can affect the physical, emotional and mental health of the person being bullied (Emerson, 2010; McGrath, Jones & Hastings, 2010). Being bullied can make a person feel anxious, worthless, or unwanted. Bullies will sometimes physically hurt the person they are bullying, by pushing, hitting or biting.

Below is a personal experience of bullying from Paul O'Dea. It is written in his own words, with some help from a support worker. He also tells us how he handled being bullied.

*When I was 7, my parents decided to put me into foster care – they felt they couldn't cope with my disability. I had no contact with them for around 8 years. Later when I was a teenager I lived with my uncle and auntie and eventually*

*reunited with my family in when I was 15. Being in foster care wasn't a very positive experience but I managed as best as I*

*could and it made me stronger – it has made me realise there are a lot of other vulnerable people in situations similar to this, and I know what it feels like.*

*I live independently now and work 3 days a week as a process worker at an Australian Disability Enterprise. I have been involved with a service provider organisation since 1996. I am the treasurer for the organisation's committee and the treasurer for a not for profit company whereby tenants with a disability manage and run their own housing.*

*When I was in my 20s I experienced bullying with a particular individual and group of*

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friends. I was fearful, frustrated and pushed around. I was fearful that the bullying could have increased to a point where it could have gotten worse. I could have been physically hurt and maybe even end up in hospital. I was scared that I might lose friends. This is an issue for many people, not many people like to lose their friends. This was a close group of friends, and we did a lot together. It was my main social group at that point in my life, we would do things together, like go to the movies, dinner, bowling and watching rugby games. It was a group of people that I valued highly and wanted to continue being friends with. This also made me vulnerable to bullying and was something that stopped me from seeking help sooner.

### **I was scared that I might lose friends.**

I was frustrated that my voice was not heard. I was frustrated that I could have done something sooner, but didn't know how to. I wanted it to stop. I was fearful about what people around me might say and do. I was pushed around physically by one individual in particular; this was mostly hitting me on my face and arms. Sometimes it got to the point where I would have to shield myself with my arms. When things didn't go his way he would lash out at me or when he was frustrated. It was a cowardice action; he knew I was a safe target as I was unlikely to fight back.

The other people in the group did not physically bully me but could not do much to help me. Sometimes I would tell him to stop, but he kept doing it. Other people in the group called me names. These people would make up derogatory names; it did not feel good being called those names. It happens to a lot of people, but more often to people with a disability. It felt like a stab to the heart, I felt bad emotionally

and I hoped it would stop. I was pretty upset and was hurt both physically and emotionally knowing close friends could do this to me. It is not acceptable but it does happen sometimes.

After being bullied I felt confused and desperate, I would wonder why me? Why not someone else? Although I did not want it to happen to anybody else either. I decided to do something about it. It only stopped after I took action. I reached a tipping point, I had enough and I had to do something about it. It took me a while but I stopped being silent. I made use of my voice, and I took action.

I talked to my dad about it, opening up to him was the hardest thing I'd ever done, because I had never spoken up before. I was afraid of his reaction towards the bully. He did get angry but he was supportive of me, and gave me ideas of how to deal with it. I raised this issue with my community worker also. Their response was good. Both the organisation involved and I had to do something about it, and put measures in place to make sure it would not happen to others. I felt sad because it had taken me so long to speak about it, also because I lost some friends. However, I was happy I could move on with my life. When I stood up for myself and took action I felt on top of the world.

I decided to confront the person who physically bullied me and I asked my support worker to be a part of that. It was a brave and hard thing to do. I could have had someone do this for me but doing it personally meant that he could see the impact that his actions had on me. I also wanted public exposure; so that he could see I had taken actions to stand up for myself. I think I took a good

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approach, he could have taken it lightly if someone else did everything for me. He knew I was serious and he knows not to mess with me. In retrospect personally taking action and having a big part in it was effective. If something similar happened I am confident I can talk to people and take action to stand up for myself sooner.

He did take it seriously, he was remorseful. I know that I had a lot of worries at that time but I sometime I still wonder why it took me so long. I think I had hoped it would go away. But ignoring bad things and hoping they will go away rarely works. It is better to say something, to face up to things earlier rather than later. I now have more friends and am involved in many different groups and organisations.

I was bullied; I remained silent for some time. I found courage to have my voice and to do something about it. This is my story but other people have different stories. I have seen other people go through similar experiences with bullying. I have recently seen another example of bullying in my workplace. I saw another person being called names and having mean things said to them on the bus and at work. As a result she has left her work. Seeing this happen made me feel unhappy, I could empathise how she might feel. I didn't know the best way to stick up for her. She was not able to directly ask for help, but her worker from another organisation picked up that something was wrong and asked her about it. She told her worker, and they spoke to the workplace. My workplace then had a meeting about bullying; I was approached by work and confirmed it had been happening. In a way I felt the bullies had won, because she left. This

is another example of how hard it is to speak up, people can be scared, or think it a normal part of the workplace culture. These things are hard to deal with. My workplace did have information session and take actions with those involved, but this is an issue that needs ongoing work. I feel that more educational work and proper safety systems need to be done at my workplace and many others.

Lots of people with a disability find it is hard for them to speak up. Bullying happens a lot, but it is over-represented to people with intellectual disability. My advice to people experiencing bullying is to talk to someone you trust as soon as possible, don't leave it. Try and get help from family, friends, workers and organisations.

My advice to community organisations is that you need to listen and take people seriously when they talk about issues like bullying. Individuals and groups should rally around that person. You may need to put things in place to make sure it doesn't happen. Community organisations and their workers need to be sensitive to the fact this might be happening, because it does and is happening to a lot of people. Be ready to ask people if something is happening, and support them in that.

Overall there is little research directed at ways to reduce bullying towards or by adults with intellectual disability. However, many articles describe ways to reduce bullying in schools, both mainstream and special education (Rose & Mondo-Amaya, 2012; Christensen et al, 2012). Anti-bullying programs can be aimed at the people doing the bullying, those being bullied, or both. Awareness training for people working with or around people with intellectual disability can help them to see the early stages of bullying and prevent it getting worse.

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As Paul rightly points out, it is most important that people who are being bullied talk to someone about it. That is the first step to reduce bullying. Although he was scared, Paul took the step of talking to his father and to people from the organisation where he works. He now feels better because he has done something to make a change.

People who are being bullied can help themselves by working on their own social abilities and assertiveness (Rose & Mondo-Amaya, 2012), by standing up for themselves. The more comfortable people are in social situations the less likely that they will be seen as 'different' and bullied.

People who bully others often see people who are different as bad or threatening (Minton, 2014). Sometimes people bully persons they think of as less than or inferior to themselves (McGrath, Jones & Hastings, 2010). Bullying can also be the result of anger management problems and behavioural problems. Education and awareness-raising about all the ways people can be different but also good people may help to break some patterns of bullying behaviour. A program that addresses different ways to reduce bullying was described by McGrath et al (2010) and included anger management, relaxation training, and awareness-raising. The group program was well suited to people with intellectual disability and their support staff. Similar approaches could be tested in workplace and day centre settings.

Overall there needs to be more research into bullying and adults with intellectual disability. The research should investigate bullying in different situations: workplace, residence, day centre, social venues. Programs to reduce bullying should be targeted at people with intellectual disability, their supporters, and the people they interact with day-to-day. No person deserves to be bullied and quality research into practices that reduce bullying is vital for us all. ●

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