

The GM on Ten



As I write this, bullying is in the news. By April (when you eventually get this newsletter), the topic will most likely have become yesterday's story, the media having done its 'say no to bullying' campaign, and moved onto something else.

Whatever the passing preoccupations of the media, bullying needs to stay front and centre with anyone interested in good mental health. There's plenty of evidence bullying is not good for us no matter what our age, stage or station in life. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and in the most tragic of cases, suicide. Because bullying is a stressor it can be implicated in all the other disorders we succumb to throughout our lives. Stress – whether physiological or psychological – has biochemical repercussions, and contributes to our bodies breaking down at their most vulnerable points, including how we function psychologically.

So what can I possibly say about bullying that hasn't already been said in the newspapers and on television?

I think it's useful to consider bullying behaviour in a broader perspective that encompasses cognitive and moral development.

In the world of cognitive development, there's a question that psychologists ask children to ascertain whether they've reached the stage of being able to view the world from another's perspective. It goes like this.

Mary and Jane are the only daughters in a family. The interviewer is talking to Mary.

Interviewer: *Mary do you have a sister?*

Mary: *Yes I have a sister.*

Interviewer: *What's your sister's name?*

Mary: *Jane.*

Interviewer: *And does Jane have a sister?*

Mary: *No Jane doesn't have a sister.*

What the exchange with Mary reveals is that Mary is unable at that stage of her cognitive development to see the world from any perspective other than her own. Mary cannot put herself in Jane's shoes and see that just as Jane is sister to Mary, so Mary is sister to Jane. However there comes a time – around the age of seven – when Mary is able to provide the correct answer. At that point, Mary has moved into a less egocentric view

of the world. The lesson is that young children are incapable of viewing the world from the perspective of another. This means they're incapable of empathy.

Being able to see the world from the perspective of another and to empathise are key to maintaining a civil society. The more they're lacking, the more we have a society that cares nought for the other and a society that allows its members to pursue unfettered self-interest.

Moral development is dependent on cognitive development. It's difficult to develop a moral compass if one cannot at least view the world from the perspective of another. Lawrence Kohlberg is the psychologist best known for research into moral development. Like Piaget before him with the stages of cognitive development, Kohlberg developed a stage theory of moral development. Although Kohlberg's theory has been around since the 1970s and has attracted its fair share of criticism, it makes an important contribution to understanding how we become moral beings.

In Kohlberg's stage theory, everyone begins at the beginning and progresses linearly through the stages. So moral development unfolds as the child ages, matures and engages with the world (a critical part of the process). There are six stages in Kohlberg's model, but in Kohlberg's view few make it through to the final stage.

The first stage is oriented to obedience and punishment. *How can I avoid punishment?* The second is self-interest. *What's in it for me?* Stages one and two are Kohlberg's 'pre-conventional' level and are typical of children, although some adults never get past this point (eg someone with a psychopathic personality).

The third stage is oriented towards conformity and gaining the approval of others, so it is driven by what others think. *How do I attain the status of being considered 'good'?* The fourth stage is where the person abides by the law because the law is seen as the mechanism for maintaining a civil society. *I must know what the law is and follow it.* Kohlberg believed the majority of adults do not get past stages three and four, hence his description of these stages as the 'conventional' level. This level is typical of adolescents and most adults.

In Kohlberg's final level – the post-conventional or principled level – there

develops a genuine interest in the welfare of others in stage 5 and a respect for universal principle and individual conscience in stage 6. At this level, the law is a means to an end rather than an end in itself and can be disobeyed if it is unjust. The individual acts because they believe it is right and not because it is self-serving, rewarded, expected, legal, or the social norm.

In spite of the criticisms of stage theories of development, there are key messages we can take from psychologists like Kohlberg and Piaget.

One is that children are not short adults. Children do not think like adults and they're not cognitively or morally equipped to make decisions and choices that a civilised society expects and requires.

A second is that children and adolescents require ongoing guidance. They need adults constantly in their lives to engage with them and guide them in their thinking and their choices. As a society we need to know where children and adolescents are, who they're with, and what they're doing. Dispensing with guidance and supervision of children and adolescents is a high-risk option.

A third is that there must always be boundaries around behaviour and consequences for going beyond those boundaries if we are to shepherd young people into a morally civilised adulthood. And they have to be consequences that matter.

If we keep behaving in a particular way, it's because there's a payoff for us at some level. If we want to stop bullying, we must identify the payoff for the bully and deprive it of oxygen. People who bully – whether they be children, adolescents or adults – are social beings like the rest of us and are seeking affirmation for who they are and what they're doing. The people standing in solidarity with the bully or who are silently consenting need to learn how to cross the line and stand with the person being bullied. A bully with a support team does a lot of damage. A bully with no fan club will soon find some other way to engage.

The GM on Ten is an opinion piece by Dr Gaye Emily Keir, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Mental Illness Fellowship of Qld. Gaye Emily Keir is a psychologist.

If you would like to comment on this or any other item in the newsletter, write to the Newsletter Editor, 95 Arthur Street, Fortitude Valley or e-mail services@mifq.org.au