

Reality bites for the bullied

Victims of bullying tell TIFFANY THONG why bullying is still a problem despite lots of education and awareness efforts

When she was in secondary school, Genevieve Lee witnessed her friend being bullied. He was ostracised by his classmates, and even beaten up, because he was of a different race from his bullies.

She decided to help him. She went to the school counsellor, who helped him by listening to his story and helped him to find ways to improve his mental well-being.

Her friend felt much better. But, unfortunately, she became the bullies' target.

For the next few years, she followed all the experts' advice on bullying. She tried to speak up and reached out to her teachers for help. She said: "My school wasn't great at handling bullying cases. The bullies didn't get punished, or rather, a severe enough punishment that made them learn their lesson."

Though she even confronted the "ring leader", the bullying continued until she graduated and entered Republic Polytechnic.

PERSISTENT PROBLEM

It is 2021. Despite widespread education and awareness about bullying, why does it still happen?

In fact, over the last decade or so, bullying has evolved from physical abuse to cyber bullying due to the increased use of messaging apps and social media.

Even fame will not protect you from being bullied, such as in the case of former member of K-pop group April, Hyunjoon, who went public with her woes.

And just last month, the Institute of Technical Education expelled a student who was caught hurling vulgarities and hitting another student on a video that went viral.

To find out why bullies still rear their ugly heads, IN spoke to 16 victims of bullying from various backgrounds and were targeted for different reasons.

Some names have been changed or modified to maintain the interviewees' privacy

MOE TAKES ALL BULLYING ALLEGATIONS SERIOUSLY

Madam Choy Wai Yin, director of the guidance branch, at the Ministry of Education's student development curriculum division, said MOE "takes a serious view of all bullying incidents" and that schools take "both preventive and intervention measures to address any bullying incidents".

Madam Choy added that when there were allegations of bullying, schools would investigate as promptly as they could and appropriate disciplinary actions were taken so that students understood that there were consequences for hurtful and unkind behaviour.

She said: "More importantly, we adopt an educational and restorative approach to help all students – including victims, perpetrators and bystanders – learn from the incident and mend relationships, to prevent further bullying,

and to learn to be caring and responsible members of the community. Parents are engaged and counselling support by school counsellors is also provided to students involved."

Other measures include using the Character and Citizenship Education curriculum, and training selected students to look out for peers in distress and establishing a peer support culture where all students are taught to help and support the victims.

Student-teachers are also trained at the National Institute of Education on establishing positive classroom culture and proper ways to handle hurtful and inappropriate behaviours.

From this year, all schools will have a dedicated key person to oversee the students' well-being. They are trained to investigate bullying incidents, and facilitate the restoration of relationship, she said.

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ANTI-BULLY WITH FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Ms Sakthi Mekana, 22, who now studies overseas, was bullied in secondary school because she was "trying too hard".

The final-year university student now champions anti-bullying on her social media platforms.

Coming from an independent girls' primary school, she did not want to be an outcast when she entered a neighbourhood school. So she began to mimic the popular kids in order to fit in when she started Secondary 1.

But things did not work out for her. The bullying started verbally, with mocking and teasing, as the popular kids put her down with insults and unpleasant remarks.

Then it slowly became physical. For instance, when she passed the bullies, they would kick her.

Ms Sakthi thought that the bullies would stop when a friend confronted one of them, but it did not. Instead, a bully went up to Ms Sakthi and shoved her against a wall, threatening to punch and slap her.

She tried to speak to the discipline mistress, but it did not work because the school did not take the issue seriously. She was told to "not over-exaggerate issues and stop overthinking".

This led her to start doubting herself and she hated people around her for not helping. She even questioned herself if she still wanted to live, because she felt like a misfit.

To cope, she tried to focus on her academics instead of on her predicament. She said: "The incident affected me a lot, it took a toll on me for years, around six years to recover from the traumatic experiences. It affected my mental and physical health. I lost my confidence."

She said she appreciated her college lecturers who helped her to leave her traumatising experiences behind. "I met amazing lecturers in college who listened to what I wanted to say. They also helped me build my confidence up again."

But she did not want to stop there. She wanted to help other victims overcome and move on from their traumatic experiences too.

Today, she has used TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to share her story and reach out to victims of bullying.

She welcomes anyone to share their stories through her platforms and conducts virtual meet-ups to talk with victims of bullying in order to motivate and encourage them.

She said: "Don't just ignore the situation just because you don't want problems in your life. Reach out to the victims and help them."

"You don't have to confront the bully, you may instead help by listening to them, or informing a more authoritative figure like a teacher or counsellor about the issue."

PROBLEM 1: SPEAKING UP CREATED TROUBLE FOR VICTIMS

Many of the interviewees said that they were advised by others to speak up. But when they did, their schools did not seem to know how to handle the issue and the bullying continued.

"I took the issue to my discipline master, instead, the bullying got worse," said 21-year-old Nguyen, who was bullied in secondary school.

"The bullies were certain that the school couldn't do anything to them because my form teacher didn't believe that I was bullied, she simply brushed me off when I tried to raise the issue."

"It went from verbal to physical and I was so scared to even go to the toilet, afraid that the bullies would take the chance to beat me up."

"It became so bad that I had to take a long break from school. The bullying stopped only when the bullies left."

Nguyen described his secondary school days as a nightmare. He had no friends and his classmates were bystanders who watched him being bullied.

His classmates witnessed the bullying, but no one said anything, Nguyen said. Subsequently, even after being physically assaulted by the bullies, he did not inform the teacher because he was afraid the situation would get worse. In fact, he was beaten up after he had tried to raise the issue.

Mr Brian Ng, now 19, was bullied because his torturers thought he behaved in a feminine way.

"I told my teachers, but they weren't able to stop them. Instead, it worsened the situation. So I thought that it would be better if I didn't even bother trying to speak up," said Mr Ng, who is now a student in Temasek Polytechnic.

"Yes, everyone knows that we have to speak up, but the issue is if the school is ready to help us when we speak up. Sadly, my school wasn't able to stop and handle the issue."

PROBLEM 2: VICTIMS DO NOT SEE ANY EFFECTIVE OUTCOMES

The 16 interviewees said that they did not see the effectiveness of the actions taken by their schools,

EXPERTS SAY

Ms Ann Hui Peng, group lead for children development at Singapore Children's Society, said bullying is a complex issue and many factors contribute to why one person will bully another.

It all boils down to "a real or perceived power imbalance", she said.

Mr Asher Low, executive director of Limitless, a non-profit organisation that works with young people, mentioned that the group dynamics and the system contribute a lot to why bullying is not stopped.

"For example, if you are being bullied in school, the witnesses may not want to speak up because they don't want to be included in the problem. Also, some schools don't practice zero-tolerance policy towards bullying."

"This means that bullying cases may not be handled properly as the victims will never share the same power that the bullies have because there isn't anyone who is empowered to help balance the power differential," Mr Low explained.

Mr Low said that there should be stronger systems where there are policies and rules to balance the power differences between the victims and the

because bullying still continued and some bullies got off scot-free.

For instance, Mr Ng believed the teachers could not handle the issue because there were no policies or school rules in place when it comes to bullying.

Vivian, a former victim and now 20, called her school's response "weak".

"They (the school) have a higher tolerance for bullying because they don't know how to handle bullying cases. With that, I felt helpless and powerless when I tried to reach out for help," said Vivian, who felt that she was bullied in primary school because of social class differences. Vivian is from a middle-class family while most of her peers then came from upper-class families.

PROBLEM 3: MANY PARENTS DO NOT KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THE SITUATION

"Ignore the bullies, they will then leave you alone" – interviewees said that they have heard this comment from parents and friends a lot.

But it actually discourages them to speak up because such statements make young people feel disempowered and leave them with the impression that their feelings were unimportant.

"How could I just ignore them? It's impossible, they were literally around me, sharing the same environment. Even after I ignored them, the bullying didn't stop," said Ms Dhiya Dharishni, 19, who is now in Republic Polytechnic.

Ms Dhiya said she was an outcast in school, and was verbally assaulted by bullies. Unpleasant insults and racial slurs were common. One bully even made offensive and insensitive remarks about her father right after finding out about his death in the same week, she said.

"The adults (her relatives) thought that it was no big deal. Ignore them and the bullies will lose interest", they said. But they didn't know the impact of the bullying. They didn't know I was having depression because of the bullying."

"And, to be honest, even if they knew about it, they probably didn't know how to handle the issue," she said with a sigh.

bullies. This way, the victims will feel safer when speaking up because the victims know that they are on equal footing with the bullies.

Social and community support can help victims to overcome their traumatic experiences. It is important that people know that victims can face the side-effects of the trauma they experienced even years after the bullying has ended, he said.

Ms Ann, who is also director of Student Service @ Children's Society, added that there were many factors why victims were unwilling to speak up. Some of the factors include a fear of retaliation, the perceived lack of support, shame and embarrassment, and a desire for acceptance.

"Our recommendation is for schools to be more proactive in checking in with students after each report and to not take each report lightly. Communication and follow-up actions are important to help restore the sense of security and to restore relationship," she said.

HELPLINES

- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Care Corner Counselling Centre (Mandarin): 1800-353-5800
- Chat Hub at *Scape: 6493-6500