

# Breaking *the* Silence

Bullying in Singapore

Edited by  
Esther Ng and Ken Rigby



# Contents

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Overview of Contents	ix
Preface	xiii
About the Editors	xvii
About the Contributors	xix
Acknowledgements	xxiii

<b>Introduction — Perception of Bullying in Singapore</b>	xxvii
<i>Esther Ng</i>	

## PART ONE

<b>1</b> <b>Story Box</b>	3
<i>Esther Ng</i>	

## PART TWO

<b>1</b> <b>Overview of Risk Factors in Bullying</b>	27
<i>Sandra Charis Tee</i>	
<b>2</b> <b>What Children Say about Bullying in Singapore</b>	41
<i>Esther Ng</i>	
<b>3</b> <b>Prevalence of Cyber Bullying in Singapore</b>	65
<i>Chelsea Chew</i>	

<b>4</b>	<b>Internet Lifestyle and Manifestation of Cyber Bullying</b>	85
	<i>Esther Ng</i>	
<b>5</b>	<b>Addressing Bullying Issues Begins at Preschool</b>	99
	<i>Esther Ng</i>	
<b>6</b>	<b>What Schools Can Do to Reduce Bullying</b>	143
	<i>Ken Rigby</i>	
<b>7</b>	<b>What Teachers Can Do to Reduce Bullying in the Classroom</b>	163
	<i>Shoko Yoneyama</i>	
<b>8</b>	<b>Supporting Children with Special Needs: Bullies, Victims, Bystanders</b>	183
	<i>Jillian Taylor</i>	
<b>9</b>	<b>What Parents Can Do to Reduce Bullying</b>	207
	<i>Ken Rigby</i>	
<b>10</b>	<b>Combating Bullying Behaviour Through Leadership in a Caring Community</b>	227
	<i>Majula Waniganayake</i>	
	<b>Epilogue</b>	245
	<i>Esther Ng</i>	
	<b>References</b>	251

## Overview of Contents

### PART I

**The Story Box** contains true stories as recounted by children and even adults who have vivid memories of being bullied or being bullies themselves. It is dedicated to help victims of bullying break the silence of their suffering, thus effort is made to ensure the originality of their language, story content and heartfelt expressions in each story shared.

### PART II

**Chapter 1** of this book presents an overview of risk factors involved in bullying, for the victim, the bully and the community. It addresses consequences that affect victims and bullies as individuals, as well as the impact on their families, schools and communities.

**Chapter 2** presents the results of a nation-wide survey of more than 4000 students (7 to 16 years old) to ascertain the landscape of bullying in Singapore. The survey investigated the trends of bullying and how students coped with the bullying situation in school. It is hoped that

as this chapter unveils the true picture of bullying in schools, those searching for solutions to the problems of bullying may find the insights gained from this survey helpful.

**Chapter 3** presents a pilot survey's findings on the prevalence of cyber bullying among students (13 to 17 years old). It is also the first large-scale survey of 3488 students conducted in Singapore which unveiled that one in every four students have been victims of cyber bullying and 31% of them are also victims of traditional bullying in school. The survey studied the incidence rates of cyber bullying, the types of cyber bullying and to whom victims of cyber bullying reported their bullying situations.

**Chapter 4** presents the current trends of the internet lifestyle and how cyber bullying manifests itself in various forms among our children and youths in Singapore. A survey investigating the cyber activities and habits of 1226 students (11 to 15 years old) by the author, Esther Ng, in 2008, unveiled unhealthy cyber habits and lifestyles that can put our children and youths at risk of cyber ill intent. This chapter discusses proactive steps that parents, schools and the community can take to nurture safe and responsible internet use.

**Chapter 5** addresses possible reasons why bullying behaviours can be learnt as early as preschool years. This chapter provides developmentally appropriate principles and practices that early childhood practitioners and governance can advocate and embrace in their early childhood setting.

**Chapter 6** presents specific steps that schools can take to reduce or stop bullying in their own community. The steps suggested are the result of observing successful outcomes from schools around the world. Although cultural differences exist in different countries,

children and teachers are much the same everywhere. It is hoped that the suggestions made in this chapter will be of help to those looking for solutions to manage the problems of bullying in schools.

**Chapter 7** discusses the role of teachers in creating a safe and positive classroom climate, the effective intervention of bullying and methods of shared concern. It also addresses the need for a caring and supportive student-teacher relationship by looking through the walls of silence and normalcy in classroom practices.

**Chapter 8** examines various complex issues that need to be considered when addressing bullying problems faced by students with special needs. This chapter presents a comprehensive approach to strategies that can be helpful to teachers and school governance who are managing students with special needs.

**Chapter 9** discusses what parents can do to stop or reduce bullying. This chapter presents steps parents can take to help their children cope with bullying problems. It addresses the roles of parents and parenting styles that may help children become socially competent to manage any bullying problems which have surfaced or may surface. The strategies for and approaches to working with schools are also presented to help those looking for support and guidance in solving a bullying problem in the school.

**Chapter 10** presents practical approaches and strategies that leaders can consider when combating the problems of bullying in their own community. This chapter discusses the role of leadership in a caring community, the need to seek policy-based solutions, the need for policies to be translated into practice with a consideration for the inclusion of children's voices, the knowledge of bullying situations and the community at large.

## Introduction

# Perception of Bullying in Singapore

Esther Ng



What one person perceives as bullying may not be the same as another in the same community. I have found this to be true here in Singapore from the interviews and surveys that were conducted in different communities to gain an understanding of how bullying is perceived. This book is an attempt to break away from what is commonly read in books about bullying and to draw upon the perception and the reality about bullying as seen through the eyes of students, educators and parents from different parts of our society.

Interestingly, the interviews and surveys gave insights to the varying definitions of what bullying is about and how a community accepts or deals with it. Some accept bullying as a norm, an expression of how things work in their community; some have learnt to cope or live with it while others are miserably tormented by it. The current situation appears to be a sad phenomenon which, I hope, will improve one day. My hope for change to come about has begun with you reading this book to find out what bullying is really like here in Singapore.

I hope that by the end of this inquiring and learning journey with us, you would have heard the silent forbearance of victims and bystanders; and would have picked up some useful information and guidelines on what you can do about bullying in your capacity as a

caring adult. I have faith in the good of mankind who will agree that no one should be subjected to such unfair, unkind and ill-intended treatment that it brings about hurt, pain and misery to a child and his or her loved ones. As adults, we can stand in the gap for children who are suffering in silence and make a difference in their lives through our intervention. Children have the right to count on us when they do not know how to seek help for their suffering when bullied.

### THE ROLE OF SELF-PERCEPTION AND STATUS

During a pre-filming session with a group of teenagers aged 13 to 16, I had the chance to ask them what they thought about bullying in general. Interestingly, some of them thought it was part of growing up and that if *“you are lucky, you don’t get bullied.”* Thirteen-year-old Min Min told us that she was badly bullied in primary school but when she entered secondary school, things got better. She related how her things would be taken from her and hidden in another person’s bag or pencil case, not just once but repeatedly. She was also targeted for being quiet and shy. The bullies would call her names and would shout at her each time they saw her. When asked if she had told anyone about the bullying, she said she had told her parents but nothing was done. She was merely told to ignore the bullies and stay away from them. And when asked how she felt during those days, she could only remember that she hated it.

Another teenager, 15-year-old Jiayi, said she was once a bully but did not think she had done anything wrong because she did not really hurt anyone physically. When asked what she had done to her victims, she rather proudly said that she would usually make them do things for her. As her class was situated in the upper levels, she would send her victims down to buy drinks or tid-bits for her and, of course, they had to pay for them too.

When asked how she felt about bullying others, she gave a shrug and said that it meant that she would not be bullied herself. She further explained that she was doing it partly to maintain her status as the *‘big sister’* and mainly out of fun. She was supposedly the *‘big sister’* in school and thus had to behave like one. Further probing revealed that her status as the *‘big sister’* in school was not a result of her joining a gang or secret society. Jiayi maintained that she would stay out of those gangs but that she was a self-professed *‘big sister’* because her friends used to call her *‘da jie’* (meaning *‘big sister’* in Mandarin).

When asked if she heard of the *“Singapore Girls’ Fight”* which was posted on the internet in June 2006, her reply was that those who hurt their victims in extreme physical torture and humiliating ways were *‘bian tai’* (meaning *‘psycho’* in Mandarin). She added, as a matter of fact, that getting a *‘bashing’* was common in the school toilet or near void decks. It was like an agreed *‘punishment’* to settle scores between parties. When she was asked how she felt about the filmed bashing and stripping of clothes of a 13-year-old girl that was posted on the internet during the *“Singapore Girls’ Fight”*, she said that it had gone overboard. She went on to reveal that the meanest thing she would do to her victims was to have them scolded by her group of friends or to get them to slap themselves a few times.

Jiayi’s honest and candid responses got me probing further into how she came up with ideas for punishing her victims for non-compliance. Jake, a 15-year-old boy who was a part of the group discussion interrupted, *“Look, it’s like this. See, we get scolded even when it’s not our fault. [When] they are happy, [they] treat us nice and when they [are] in bad mood, you get it if you’re ‘sway’ (meaning ‘unlucky’ in Hokkien dialect).”*

Jake’s sudden opinion broke his long silence and took me by surprise. He had been quiet and sceptical throughout the discussion. He spoke slowly, as if well-thought through, and said, *“I’m not with*

her (Jiayi's) group. I don't belong to any group. So don't ask me that. I came because I want to know why you're talking about bullying. See, we have to survive in school and cannot look stupid. When teachers scold us, we look damn stupid and feel insulted because they do it in front of everyone. But never mind even if they punish us wrongly or insult us, we have to control ourselves. Like, what can you do? They're the teachers. We don't want to tell our parents because we don't want to involve them. After some time, you learn to survive. They just use their power to order you around. This is life here. Some people get picked, some don't. Sometimes, even school counsellors (meaning, student counsellors) pick on people they don't like. Then those people get [a] warning or [get] punished. It's just how 'sway' you are. Is this bullying or not? You tell me. You 'sway', you get it. What can you do for us if we are bullied?"

My discussion with this group of teenagers does not represent the thoughts and behaviour of all teenagers in Singapore. It does, however, reveal some inner thoughts and feelings, most probably spoken for the first time.

The status of a child like that of Jiayi's can be self-created because of her personality, character, background or looks. It can also be determined by her environment. Jiayi's environment obviously supported and quite likely tolerated her behaviour and acts. The fact that she was seen as the 'big sister' was an endorsement for her to behave the way she did. It was most probably an unspoken expectation as well, that everyone else ranked beneath her status would have to subject themselves to her wishes and fancies.

The school is often filled with students like that of Jiayi, Min Min or Jake. The status of the child helps to determine whether he or she gets to be the bully, gets bullied or remains a bystander. Understandably, children with a "lower status" like Min Min or any other victims of bullying will hate going to school. A series of possible consequences can result, such as skipping school, not joining in school activities,

feeling targeted, being unfairly treated, socially excluded, loneliness, anger or even thoughts of suicide. A teenage girl, Susan<sup>1</sup> (not her real name), was reported in *The New Paper*, to have taken the plunge from a block of flats, leaving behind a diary recounting how she could not understand the hate everyone felt towards her and how no one could see that she hated being left alone or stared at as if something was so terribly wrong with her. According to *The New Paper* report, the court ruled out foul play and classified her case as suicide due to family and school problems.

Susan was identified by her teacher to be at risk when she was discovered with thoughts of suicide. Unfortunately, the school counsellor, to whom she was referred by her teacher, did not detect suicidal tendencies before she finally took the plunge to death. The *New Paper* had a peek into her diary and found the entries, which described her everyday happenings in school, heartbreaking and, in the light of her death, chilling. Two years after her death, her father continued to cling on to the belief that if the bullying had been halted in school, she would not have committed suicide. Her parting words, described as 'the chilling finale' from *The New Paper*<sup>1</sup> were "Cry not for her death, for she has no regrets. Weep not for her soul, for she is in a better place."

## HOW A COMMUNITY VIEWS BULLYING DETERMINES HOW IT MANAGES BULLYING

The stories of Jiayi, Min Min and Jake are often not reported and thus quite likely not made known to the relevant authorities who could have intervened on behalf of the victims and bystanders who might fear being the next victim. It is a sad phenomenon when the

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<sup>1</sup> Owyong, R. J. (2005, Sep). Driven To Death. *The New Paper*, p.2.

perpetrator is self-righteous about his or her bullying behaviour and the victim fears the consequences of reporting the bully. Moral reasoning, empathy, grace, forbearance, kindness or respect towards an individual no longer plays a major role in the process of decision making for the bully or bystander in a school that tolerates and endorses bullying.

How we perceive bullying determines how we manage any case of bullying. A victim or bystander who thinks it is part of growing up or a norm in the social environment will allow the bullying to continue, as in the case of Min Min. A bully who thinks it is justifiable or acceptable to behave in the way he or she does, will continue to do so with intent and self-righteousness and without reserve, as in the case of Jiayi.

If a parent or teacher does not believe that there are undesirable consequences in bullying, little will be done to stop the bullying.

It is evident that the community is divided on this issue. Our inquiries suggest that although some teachers believe that bullying exists in schools, it does not happen frequently. Said one teacher, *“We don’t see a lot of bullying.”*

There are some who feel that the usual teasing, name calling or jeering constitutes playful behaviour on the part of the students and would not consider them bullying. *“If name calling is bullying, then you hear them a lot in school. Still, I don’t think it is serious enough to interfere.”*

In fact, some teachers even feel that they are the target of bullying, *“I think it’s more of the students bullying the teachers. They will gang up on you if they don’t like you.”*

Parents in general show more concern about the problem of bullying, but sometimes they have different views on what should be done about it.

For example, one parent said that he would teach his child to retaliate if he is bullied. *“I will teach my son to bully back if the bully*

*strikes again. It’s no use telling the teacher. He has to learn to defend himself. So he should start now.”*

Another parent expressed that he would bring the matter to the relevant authorities. *“If my child is really hurt by the bully, I will report [it] to the police”.*

Unlike the earlier group of parents who instinctively sought justice and protection for their children, one parent was more perturbed that his child was complaining too much about being verbally ridiculed by his schoolmates, saying, *“I always tell him that it’s only words and if he doesn’t like it, he should just walk away.”*

Although our findings do not represent the views of all parents or of the Ministry of Education in Singapore, it seems to suggest that teachers are not seen to be doing much about bullying, possibly because they have not been seen as actively involved in identifying bullying among their students and conducting appropriate intervention.

We believe that little progress to solve the problems of bullying can be made until we have reached a greater consensus among members of the school and in the community in general that bullying in and outside of school should not be tolerated.

This book has been written to help achieve a greater understanding of the problem of bullying in schools in Singapore and how best it can be resolved.



# PART ONE

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# Story Box

Esther Ng

The Story Box is especially dedicated to victims of bullying who have a story to tell. You will read short stories and some long ones as well. Some are told by children as young as seven years old; and some by adults who can recall their bullying experiences. For some of them, this is the first time they are telling their story and it is written in their own language. The stories are transcripts of the original, candidly spoken or written by the victims themselves. Therefore, we apologise for any grammatical or language structures that do not conform to the best English standard. Effort has been made to retain the original essence of their thoughts, language and accounts so that their voices can be heard as they should be. However, the names of persons have been changed to protect the identity of victims and bullies.

Any part of the story content in Story Box that may bear a semblance to any person, is likely coincidental and without prejudice or ill intent.

**Bullied ... and They Made It Look Like an Accident**

Story of Ming, 8 years old

The Primary 5 boys in the student care centre bully me when I go into the boy's toilet. Jay and Raju. Derick also. I don't like to see them in the toilet. They always do things to me. They bang at my door and say that they can see me because they are taller. Then, they jump outside my door. I don't like it when they do this. That day, they followed me into the toilet, then they took the ice lolly paper cover and filled it with cold water. Derick squirted [the water] at me. I said I will tell teacher but he said, "Then tell teacher, tell lor." They made me feel stupid for saying that I would tell our teacher. Another time, when they threw my book on the floor and stepped on it, I told my teacher. But she believed them when they ganged up to say that it was an accident and I was just being a "cry baby." I wish my teacher will believe me just one time and tell them to stop.

**Bullied ... and They Made Me Look Like I'm Careless**

Story of Tong, 8 years old

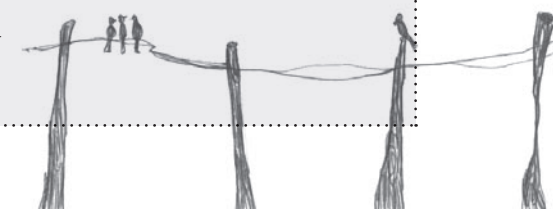
I am mostly angry because they like to take my things and hide them. Joel Lee and Leonard. Sometimes Mohan also. When I ask them, they look at me like I'm stupid. Then, they sneak my things into the lost-and-found box in class. I know it's them because they always laugh at me when I can't find my things. It's not the first time. I tried to tell my teacher but she doesn't believe

me. It's no use. Don't know when they will stop doing things to me. I'm not stupid but they make me feel like it. Then, they make me look like I'm telling lies to my teacher. I don't like it when they laugh at me. I know it's them because one time they even ask me, "How, cannot find right?" Then they laugh again. I really wish they will stop.

**Bullied ... but Made to Accept and Forgive**

Story of Jia Ern, 7 years old

I don't know why the three of them from the Primary 5 class — Ming Teck, Xian and Karen — do this to me. They scream every time I walk into the room. Sometimes, even when I walk past them. They shout "Lao cha bo" (meaning 'old woman' in the Hokkien dialect). I never do anything wrong but they always call me names. I know they are shouting at me because they don't do that to other people. I don't like their noise. I told my mother but she said, "Just don't bother about them." They won't stop even if I pretend not to hear. I don't want to go to the student care centre because of this, but my mother wants me to go. She needs to go to work and this is the only one near our house. I really wish I am old enough to stay home and take care of myself. I try not to think about them. At home, not so much. But when I wake up, I feel like I want to vomit. Now, all the children also scream like them. My mother said I have to try to forgive them. She will speak to Mrs Bala, the Student Care Supervisor tomorrow. I don't know if things will become worse.



## BREAKING THE SILENCE

### Words of a Secondary 1 boy

"We should train the teachers in a more effective way to handle the bullying problem. Mostly the ones that bully are the ones that are more popular in the class or school."

### Words of a Secondary 2 girl

"I would like bullying to stop because people come to school to study and not [to] get bullied by others because of their appearance or something they have done."

### Words of a Secondary 3 girl

"Often my close friend or the one I trusted bullied me. It hurts me more when a person I thought are trustworthy picks on me."

### Words from a Secondary 3 girl

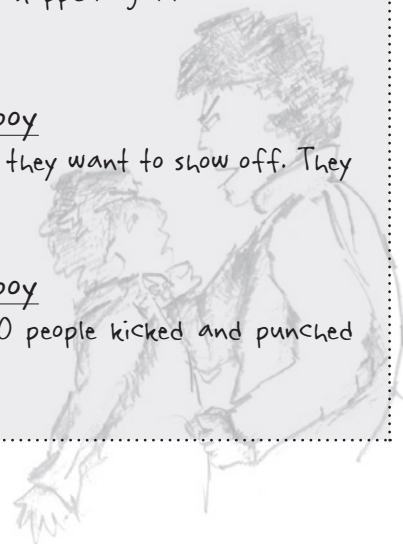
"I dun (don't) wish to haf (have) any more bullying in skool (school) any more and I dun (don't) wish to see tiz (this) kind of things happen and I been bullys (bullied) in school [which] iz (is) verie (very) sad and miserable and I really try everidae (everyday) to kill myself. I dun (don't) wish [it] to happen again."

### Words from a Secondary 4 boy

"People always bully in big groups as they want to show off. They don't have guts to bully so!"

### Words from a Secondary 4 boy

"It was my birthday and about 30 people kicked and punched me."



# PART TWO

# Overview of Risk Factors in Bullying



Sandra Charis Tee

Fourteen-year-old Cindy and her gang of friends shared a pack of cigarettes in the girls' washroom as Cindy lamented about her lost love and cursed Melanie, the girl who had "stolen" her boyfriend. At this moment, Melanie walked into the washroom and an ominous silence fell upon the place. Sensing that trouble was brewing, Melanie turned around to leave the washroom. She had hardly taken a step when Cindy grabbed her shoulder and pushed her to the floor. Cindy's gang joined in immediately, pinning Melanie down to the ground, stripping off her school uniform and kicking her in the face.

The above is based on an actual event that occurred in Singapore. Bullying, a form of aggressive behaviour as exhibited by Cindy and her gang, has been identified by Greene (2003) as possessing four essential characteristics present in most definitions of bullying. First, bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour marked by the intention of the perpetrator(s) to inflict harm, distress or fear upon the victim(s). Second, such incidents are unprovoked by the victim(s). Third,

there exists an actual or perceived power differential between the perpetrator(s) and the victim(s). Fourth, bullying behaviour typically involves repeated instances of such behaviour.

The Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2001) and Field (1999) proposed four broad areas of bullying. These include verbal (such as name-calling and verbal threats), physical (including hitting, tripping and damaging belongings), social (for example, exclusion from play groups), and psychological (for instance, stalking the victim).

It is widely accepted that bullying exerts a negative influence on the mental and/or physical well-being of the victim (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Linke, 1998; Thompson *et al.*, 2002; Swearer *et al.*, 2001), as well as the perpetrator (e.g., Kumpulainen *et al.*, 2001; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Theriot *et al.*, 2004) both in the short-term as well as in the long-run (Field, 1999; Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). The next section provides an overview of these consequences.

## CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

### ***The Victim***

Rigby (2006) proposed that the repercussions on victims of bullying could be classified under four broad categories, namely:

1. Low psychological well-being
2. Poor social adjustment
3. Acute psychological distress
4. Physical unwellness

Using Rigby's (2006) proposed framework, the consequences of victimisation include:

1. Low self-esteem and unhappiness (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001),

- or poor body esteem (Lunde *et al.*, 2006);
2. Loneliness (Nansel *et al.*, 2001), absenteeism, decreased enjoyment of school, decreased level of participation in activities, premature school-leaving (Crozier & Sklipidou, 2002; Hazler & Carney, 2000; Roberts & Coursol, 1996); poor academic functioning (Schwartz *et al.*, 2005), victims adopting bullying behaviours themselves (Rigby, 1996), or high risk delinquent behaviours such as carrying a weapon to school, drug and alcohol uses, gang involvement, physical fights, and murder (Brockenbrough *et al.*, 2002; Hazler & Carney, 2000; Sullivan *et al.*, 2006);
3. Anxiety (Brockenbrough *et al.*, 2002; Storch *et al.*, 2005), social phobia (Storch *et al.*, 2005), eating disorders (Bond *et al.*, 2001; Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002), depression (Bond *et al.*, 2001), suicidal ideation (Beale, 2001); and
4. Psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and stomach pains, or physical injuries as a result of the bullying (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).

Victims also experience negative long-term effects as a result of childhood bullying. These include lower achievement levels in adulthood (McNamara, B. & McNamara, F., 1997), interpersonal difficulties, poorer social self-esteem (Ledley *et al.*, 2006), and being overprotective as parents, which could lead to their offspring becoming victims as well (Finnegan *et al.*, 1998; McNamara, B. & McNamara, F., 1997).

### ***The Bully***

Although bullies use bullying behaviours to gain and/or maintain dominance over their victims (Beale, 2001), they are themselves at risk of experiencing mental and physical health difficulties. For example, Kumpulainen *et al.* (2001) found that, among bullies, nearly one-third were diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, 12.5% with

depression, and 12.5% with oppositional or conduct disorder. A large number of bullies were found to underachieve in school (Carney & Merrell, 2001), engage in unhealthy activities such as smoking (Nansel *et al.*, 2001), indulge in frequent and excessive drinking and other forms of substance abuse (Kaltiala-Heino *et al.*, 2000), or perform below potential in employment settings (Carney & Merrell, 2001).

Bullies may develop antisocial behaviour in adulthood (Pulkkinen & Pitkanen, 1993) and engage in criminal activities (Glew *et al.*, 2000; Roberts, 2000). As adults, they are more likely to display physical aggression against their family (Roberts, 2000), and their children would in turn become bullies as well (Carney & Merrell, 2001), thus perpetrating aggressive behaviours from one generation to the next.

### ***The School***

The entire climate of a school can be adversely affected if bullying behaviour remains unchecked. Hernandez and Seem (2004), Hanish and Guerra (2000) and Glew *et al.* (2000) noted that bullying behaviours, and the associated threats and intimidation could create a negative school atmosphere as classroom instruction is disrupted, students' attachment to the school is reduced, and students are distracted and scared.

Having recognised the consequences, it behooves us to examine the risk factors involved in the development of bullying behaviours so that effective interventions may be identified.

## **RISK FACTORS**

Risk factors refer to the variables that increase the chances of the onset, severity and duration of a problem (Khoury-Kassabri *et al.*, 2005). The following framework gleaned from Besag (1989), Rigby

(1996), and Withers and Russell (2001) can be used as a basis for summarising risk factors into four categories: (a) the individual, (b) the family, (c) the school, and (d) socio-cultural.

### ***Individual Factors***

It has been reported that certain demographic, physical, psychological and behavioural characteristics increase the likelihood of children being bullied at school. For instance, victimisation is more common among younger children than among older children, as younger children are less likely to have developed social, physical and cognitive skills to defend themselves against peer attacks (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Besides maturity, children who are physically weaker (Hanish & Guerra, 2000), obese (Robinson, 2006), or who experience moderate to severe craniofacial conditions (Carroll & Shute, 2005) are more at risk to be at the receiving end of aggressive acts.

Egan and Perry (1998) also found that children with low self-regard, particularly low self-perceived peer social competence, are more susceptible to victimisation. The authors suggested three probable reasons for their findings. First, children with low self-perceived peer social competence may exhibit specific behavioural incompetencies such as submission and emotional dysregulation during peer conflicts. This suggestion is supported by Fox and Boulton's (2006) study which found that submissive/nonassertive social behaviour is a significant predictor of victimisation. Second, these children may behave in self-deprecating ways, hence inviting abuse. Third, they may occupy low social positions in peer groups, and hence lack peer support and defence. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that victimisation and self-perceived peer social competence share a reciprocal relationship, that is, each affects the other.

Storch *et al.* (2005), in their longitudinal study of 144 ninth grade adolescents, found that increases in social anxiety and social