

**23/3/09**

A constructive approach to the issue of 'bullying'.

The school's first effort to stage a "Top House" competition based on TV's Top Town events was a great success last Thursday. Our Y4-6 children, their teachers, a large group of parents and members of the PTA came out in force to support this event that added a school family dimension to the competition. Rhodes House took the honours for the most points won on the day congratulations!

What I found truly significant was the atmosphere, as it was overwhelmingly refreshing after all the debates across the country about bullying in schools. At Elmwood we want the children to thrive in a school where high standards of respect and care for each other dominate their behaviour patterns. We saw those values in the children as they supported each other in this competition, as they interacted with their teachers and parents and we saw it in their teamwork as they faced the challenges within the various events on offer.

Yes, like any other school, we have incidents of bullying from time to time, and we deal with them appropriately with the support of the parents. It seems that this issue comes up every year and reaches the headlines often these days.

Two years back I wrote a newsletter article about the subject, and I think it is timely to do an abridged repeat. Education debates at this time are seeking to find solutions to this increasing problem that schools are dealing with. There will be those who want to lay blame on the school, and others will want to shift the blame to parents, social services and anyone else who may have some involvement. Whatever opinion shared, the problem of bullying in our society is worrying and needs to be addressed. Of course the public debate must make us all consider what might be happening in the Elmwood School playground!

The staff at Elmwood is very attuned to the welfare and needs of all our children and can recognise the early signs of potential bullying. However bullying occurs in various forms at all ages and stages, including from a very early pre-school age. Bullying isn't an isolated incident but an on-going behaviour pattern that can be difficult to reverse. I expect it is because of this that the definition of bullying is so wide and open to be interpreted differently.

It is paramount that we take a constructive approach to debating why bullying happens, how best it can be detected and the measures that can be taken to reduce the incidences within our community and school environment. The importance of understanding the underlying causes of bullying is important to enable solutions to be found that will reverse this behaviour pattern. However the search for the cause, or indeed the cause itself, should not be used to excuse bullying as this will only condone and reinforce the ongoing negative behaviour. Those who bully need to understand the consequence as well as the cause. In this regard the school has a transparent and constructive process in how cases are dealt with. We believe that the value of "taking ownership for one's actions" is quite critical to a child's development. To be effective in our approach we rely on parents to support the school's procedures. Not to do so undoubtedly sends a clear message that the bullying is 'OK', and/or the blame can be shifted to someone or something else.

So what do we know and recognise about the effects of bullying? At what age can we recognise characteristics of potential bullying and how do we determine the difference

between competitive play and potential bullying?

It is very true that bullies can take the happiness out of a child. Bullying can turn something simple like just wanting to play in a game, join in a group discussion, or play on the equipment in the schoolyard, into a scary event that's anticipated with worry all day. Children who are bullied will often develop a low self-esteem whereas those doing the bullying may go on to engage in more destructive, antisocial behaviours as teens and adults. These children will often pick on others in order to feel powerful, popular, important, or in control. Often, they torment the same victims repeatedly.

There is much advice on offer to parents of children that become victims of bullying and this ranges from advice on retaliation to advice on self-control. I believe we can help reduce the fear by listening and offering love and support. Acquiring self-control helps develop resilience and will improve social confidence. We can teach our children how to 'walk away' and not allow the 'bully' to gain satisfaction. Retaliation can often escalate to a level far beyond the original antagonism – this then becomes the 'bullying'.

However, what advice is available if it is *your* child who is the bully. This is often an overlooked aspect of the debate and sadly therefore more difficult to openly recognise. It is important to remember that your school is here to help whether your child is being bullied, or your child is the bully. We need to remember that our children are in the process of 'growing up' to become adults and the school shares a partnership with the community to ensure that we help them to do this in the best possible way. Bullying is an unacceptable behaviour and should not be brushed under the mat. When it is potentially identified in any of our children it is important that we take action together to prevent escalation.

I would like to take this opportunity once again to recognise the Elmwood parents and community for their huge contribution in instilling strong supportive and co-operative values in the children that attend the school. When bullying issues do come up (as minor as they may be) we are able to handle them effectively because the partnership we have with our parents is strong.

Kevin Gooch, Principal