

Y Australia Submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

School bullying is a persistent challenge in Australia, The Y, a proud member of the World YMCA has a long-standing mission to support children and young people.

Bullying disproportionately affects students who are marginalised or disengaged from education, compounding their existing vulnerabilities and often leading to further alienation, academic underachievement, and long-term mental health challenges. This includes students that:

- Have a disability or additional learning needs
- Children and young people that present with neuro divergence
- Identify as LGBTQI+
- Are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- Are from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- Are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Have experienced trauma, care, homelessness, or juvenile justice involvement
- Are chronically absent or have disengaged from traditional schooling models

The effects of bullying on marginalised and disengaged students can be particularly severe. Many experience increased levels of school refusal, with some ultimately dropping out of education altogether. Their mental health often deteriorates, with heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and in some cases, suicidal thoughts.

As these students become more disconnected from their education and future opportunities, they may also face a greater likelihood of contact with the child protection or youth justice systems, further entrenching cycles of disadvantage and exclusion.

Our Associations in Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales provide a number of targeted school and school support programs to re-engage students many of whom have experienced School Bullying.

The Y recognises that school bullying continues to be a critical concern in Australian education, affecting around one in five students weekly. It manifests in physical, verbal, social, and online forms and significantly impacts students' mental health, academic performance, and long-term wellbeing.

Bullying in schools is a multifaceted issue influenced by a range of individual, social, and systemic factors. At the individual level, students who engage in bullying behaviour often struggle with emotional regulation, empathy, and social problem-solving skills. These deficits can lead to aggressive behaviour as a means of coping or asserting control. We recognise that those who are hurting the most, do most of the hurting.

Peer dynamics also play a crucial role. In many cases, bullying is reinforced by a desire to gain social inclusion, peer approval, or avoid being marginalised. The fear of exclusion can pressure students into participating in or enabling bullying behaviour, either actively or passively.

The broader school climate significantly impacts bullying prevalence. Schools with weak or inconsistently enforced anti-bullying policies, limited teacher training, and low staff confidence in addressing incidents tend to see higher rates of bullying. A lack of a positive, inclusive school culture can further exacerbate the problem.

Dr. Lisa Mundy from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) noted the alarming findings on school bullying in Melbourne. She revealed that approximately 50% of Grade 3 students reported experiencing some form of bullying, based on a six-year study involving 1,329 students from 43 primary schools. Dr. Mundy emphasised that bullying rates are highest in mid-primary school and have increased compared to 20 years ago.¹

Evelyn Field, author of *Bully Blocking*, highlighted a concerning trend known as "lacking," where students are bullied and the incidents are recorded and shared online. Schools are not adequately addressing this issue, students often believe they can engage in such behaviour without facing consequences. These discussions underscore the ongoing challenges schools face in combating bullying and the need for effective strategies to protect students.

Family and community contexts also contribute. Students may experience or witness violence, neglect, or disengagement at home, which can influence how they interact with peers. Additionally, limited access to support services in the community can leave vulnerable students without the help they need.

Finally, the rise of online platforms has expanded the scope of bullying beyond school hours. Social media and messaging apps enable around-the-clock harassment, often anonymously, with harmful content easily shared and amplified, intensifying the emotional impact on victims.

The Y has long demonstrated leadership in youth engagement and education, offering inclusive and practical models that reduce bullying and re-engage at-risk students.

The Y's Education and Re-engagement Programs

Across several states, Y Associations operate alternative education and support programs designed to re-engage young people who have disengaged from traditional schooling, many of whom have been impacted by bullying, either as targets or as students exhibiting harmful behaviours. These programs include Y-operated independent schools in Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria, and the Alternative Suspension program in New South Wales. Both provide trauma-informed, relationship-centred environments that aim to restore students' connection to learning, wellbeing and community.

¹ Fujikawa, S., Mundy, L. K., Canterford, L., Moreno-Betancur, M., & Patton, G. C. *Bullying across late childhood and early adolescence: A prospective cohort of students assessed annually from Grades 3 to 8*. *Academic Pediatrics*. 2021;21(2):344–351. doi:10.1016/j.acap.2020.10.011.

Y Queensland, Y WA and Y Whittlesea operate schools dedicated to support students who have disengaged from mainstream education. Our schools focus on:

- Creating inclusive, respectful environments.
- Teaching positive relationship skills.
- Empowering bystander intervention.
- Individualised learning plans focused on wellbeing, skills development, and career pathways.
- Elevating student voice and leadership.
- Strong Bullying and Harassment Policy that fosters psychological safety for all.

The student-led, trauma-informed environment of our Y Schools shows significant success in improving both engagement and emotional wellbeing.

Alternative Suspension Program – Y NSW

This first-of-its-kind initiative in Australia, the Alternative Suspension program is based on a Canadian program developed by the YMCA in Quebec and transforms suspension into an opportunity for intervention.

The program:

- Engages secondary students during suspension periods.
- Focuses on social and emotional growth, decision-making, and reconnection to learning.
- Offers wraparound support and re-engagement pathways.

Initial outcomes indicate improved student behaviour, reduced recurrence of suspension, and better relationships with schools and families. Alternative Suspension focuses equally on supporting young people experiencing bullying and those perpetrating, recognising both cohorts require and have, the right supports.

Our program content provides comprehensive education on the nature of bullying, its effects, and ways to prevent it. We facilitate workshops that empower students with the knowledge to recognise bullying behaviour, understand its impact on individuals and the school community, and learn effective strategies for intervention and support. This includes working with young people bullying other students to help them understand the impact of their actions and to develop healthier ways of interacting with their peers.

We create safe and inclusive environments where young people can openly discuss their experiences with bullying. Through group discussions, peer mentoring, and support, participants are encouraged to share their feelings and experiences, which fosters empathy and understanding among students, ultimately reducing the incidence of bullying.

Our program also has a focus on building essential social-emotional skills, such as empathy, conflict resolution, and assertiveness. By equipping participants with these skills, we enable them to navigate social

situations more effectively, stand up against bullying, and become advocates for themselves and their peers. Where appropriate in a group setting or 1:1 we also facilitate discussions that encourage perpetrators to see situations from the perspective of their victims. By fostering empathy, we help them recognise the harms their actions cause, which is a critical step in changing their behaviour.

We connect students with a network of support, including counselling, case management, and pro-social activities, to ensure they have access to resources when facing bullying. This holistic approach helps students feel less isolated and more empowered to seek help and report incidents of bullying.

More than 350 young people have engaged with the program to date, and we would welcome the opportunity to share further information with the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Taskforce about improvements in students' presenting behaviours (at three-months post-program), including in areas such as bullying, disruptive behaviour and verbal abuse.

Embedding Restorative Practice in All Interventions

Many traditional school responses remain overly reliant on exclusionary discipline, including suspensions or expulsions. These practices often fail to address root causes, alienate young people further, and disproportionately impact those already marginalised. Similarly, under-resourced schools may lack staff training or support to intervene early and effectively. Reactive-only approaches, without accompanying wellbeing supports, can cause harm.

Importantly, the Y's approach acknowledges that traditional responses to bullying, often centred on punishment or exclusion, can be counterproductive, particularly for students who are already marginalised or disengaged. These practices risk deepening trauma and can alienate both victims and perpetrators from education.

Bullying within our cohorts is rarely binary. Many of the young people we work with have been both victims and perpetrators of bullying behaviour at different times. These behaviours often reflect complex personal histories shaped by trauma, family dynamics, and inconsistent support in education systems. Students who disengage from school due to bullying are not only those targeted but also those subjected to exclusionary disciplinary responses for their own behaviour, often in the absence of restorative intervention.

The Y advocates for strong, well-facilitated restorative practices as the most effective method to address bullying. Restorative approaches that centre on repairing relationships, fostering accountability, and equipping young people with emotional literacy offer long-term benefits far beyond punitive measures. They help students take responsibility for their actions, recognise the impact on others, and re-engage with school communities in meaningful ways.

We also must acknowledge the role that school staff and authority figures can unintentionally play in a student's disengagement. In some cases, the exercise of authority, while not deliberately harmful, is nonetheless experienced by students as a form of bullying. These perceptions are valid and require a cultural shift in how we understand power dynamics and student experience within educational environments.

There also remains a lack of consistent, national data on bullying prevalence and outcomes. Schools vary widely in how and whether they report incidents, and students often remain silent due to fear or lack of trust. Any national framework must address this through a consistent reporting and accountability model,

with student-informed design. We believe that government responses to bullying must aim to minimise exclusion, regardless of a student's role in any incident, and that restorative practices should be embedded within school culture. This includes a focus on training and development for school leaders and staff to ensure these methods are implemented authentically and with care.

Sport and Recreation – Creating Safer, More Connected Communities

Sport and recreation are not just tools for physical fitness, they are powerful vehicles for connection, inclusion, and emotional development. For many young people, particularly those who feel excluded or disengaged from school, the sporting environment provides an alternative entry point to belonging, structure, and support.

Across Australia, Y Associations run inclusive sport and recreation programs that support thousands of children and young people each year. These programs are intentionally designed to build emotional resilience, model respectful behaviours, and create safe social environments where bullying is less likely to occur and more likely to be addressed early.

Building Social and Emotional Skills

Sport provides a natural setting to learn empathy, manage frustration, and navigate complex group dynamics. Through teamwork, fair play, and leadership opportunities, young people develop:

- Empathy and Respect – by working toward shared goals and supporting teammates
- Self-regulation – learning to manage emotions in both victory and loss
- Conflict resolution – handling disagreements constructively rather than through aggression

These skills not only reduce the likelihood of bullying but also empower young people to be upstanders when they see harmful behaviour.

Fostering Inclusion and Belonging

Structured, inclusive sports programs offer low-barrier entry points for all young people, particularly those who may not feel seen or valued in other settings. Y programs actively welcome:

- Young people with disabilities or neurodivergence
- Those from CALD or low-income backgrounds
- LGBTQI+ youth
- Students who have disengaged from formal education

By focusing on participation and strengths, not ability or background, Y programs help shift peer dynamics and reduce social hierarchies that often fuel bullying.

Strengthening Peer Connections and Mentorship

Sport encourages new friendships across social groups, reducing the isolation and exclusion that often sit beneath bullying behaviour. Y-run programs also create mentorship pathways, with youth leaders, coaches, and program facilitators acting as positive role models and trusted adults.

Providing Safe, Supervised Spaces

Y recreation programs are deliberately structured and staffed to reduce unsupervised time and create safety through routine, expectation, and visibility. This includes:

- Clear codes of conduct
- Visible adult presence
- Supportive peer norms

These environments are especially important for young people who experience bullying in unstructured or online settings.

Boosting Confidence and Self-worth

Participation in sport is proven to increase self-esteem and reduce social anxiety, two key protective factors for young people vulnerable to bullying. For those who have been targeted, sport provides a pathway to re-engagement and renewed confidence.

Evidence from Sport Australia and the Australian Sports Commission reinforces what we see every day in Y programs: that well-designed, community-based participation reduces anti-social behaviours and improves wellbeing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Bullying in Australian schools is not just a behavioural issue. It is a complex and deeply entrenched problem shaped by social, psychological, and structural factors. Left unaddressed, it continues to harm young people's mental health, disrupt their education, and contribute to long-term cycles of disengagement and disadvantage.

Programs led by Y Associations across the country offer practical, evidence-informed models that demonstrate how early intervention, emotional literacy, restorative practice, and inclusive environments can create meaningful change.

Y Australia urges the Review Committee to consider these proven approaches in shaping a national response. A consistent and coordinated framework, grounded in the realities of students' lives, can significantly reduce both the incidence and impact of bullying in schools.

We welcome the opportunity to support this work further. We would be pleased to meet with the Committee, share insights from our programs, and facilitate site visits to demonstrate our impact in action. Thank you for your leadership on this vital issue and for including the voices of community-based organisations in building a safer, more inclusive future for all young people.

Contact: Jarrod Dobson

Email: jarrod.dobson@the-y.org.au