

Bullies have no place in today's society

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HOW do you think you would respond if you saw someone acting in an inappropriately aggressive way to others around you?

This was an issue raised in the *Geelong Advertiser* earlier this year following an incident of youth violence in the mall. However, how we think we would react as a bystander might not be a true indicator of what we would actually do in such a situation.

Research shows that how bystanders react to aggressive behaviour will often make a difference, including to the behaviour of other bystanders. If the first people witnessing a violent assault step in to

intervene, then others will tend to do so as well. If initial witnesses refrain from intervening, others will tend to stand back as well.

I think this theme resonates with many other issues recently raised in the media. If we extend the issue of the response of bystanders to other forms of inappropriately aggressive or forceful behaviour, it relates to issues including workplace harassment, including bullying within the Geelong Council itself, and institutional childhood sexual abuse including in church organisations, the focus of the current royal commission.

One issue raised is that many people in authority may have turned a blind eye to reports of extremely abusive behaviour.

However, in many of these situations there are numerous bystanders. When someone is harassed or bullied at work, there are commonly many public signs of it.

How do we respond when we witness our co-workers being

mistreated? We might like to think that we stand up in the face of injustice, but the most common response might be to be a passive bystander, perhaps expressing concern in private, but doing nothing to intervene.

Bystanders' reactions to violence can be categorised in a number of ways.

Sometimes bystanders, perhaps being part of a friendship group with the perpetrator, can enjoy observing their forceful behaviour.

Others might avoid responding, perhaps owing to concern as to how the bully and his or her friends might react to their intervention. Others might avoid intervening out of apathy, thinking there is nothing they can do.

Bystanders can also react assertively and helpfully, intervening to prevent the abusive behaviour, or at least its escalation. For example, the most effective way to deal with bullying is for others to confront the bully as a group, explaining that the aggressive behaviour is harmful and unacceptable.

One further example might challenge us. It occurs further afield, beyond our immediate home and work environments, but at the fringes of our culture.

There have been many children in detention who would have been harmed, and indeed traumatised, by their experience of detention while in Australian care.

In healthy cultures, including healthy families and healthy organisations, we make it clear that inappropriately forceful or harmful behaviour is not acceptable. Our collective response to reports of the harm that children have suffered in detention will further shape our culture.

When it comes to this issue, we are all bystanders.

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