

# Children and Young People with Disability: Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Submission

*“I have been bullied every year since I began school. Mostly verbally, behind my back or through social isolation. It has never once been handled properly, so the bullying never stopped”.*

*Young person with disability, CYDA Youth Education Survey 2024*

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Children and Young People  
with Disability Australia

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**A note on terminology:**

Throughout this submission, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) uses person-first language, e.g., person with disability. However, CYDA recognises many people with disability choose to use identity-first language, e.g., disabled person.



**Content warning: This submission references *bullying, violence, and ableism*.**

**Acknowledgements:**

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this Land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.



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## Summary of recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Critically review bullying prevention, and related policies, models, and practices using measures defined by impacted and equity cohorts, such as children and young people with disability.

**Recommendation 2.** Use co-design to develop metrics for use in the critical review (Recommendation 1) and future policies, models, and practices, to reveal and examine the social processes that enable bullying to occur.

**Recommendation 3:** The federal Department of Education to use the outcome of the critical review to develop a comprehensive suite of relational neuroscience-informed resources, co-designed with users and equity groups. These should:

- Anchor existing successful policies, models and practices into a theoretical framework to allow for more meaningful and reflective practice to occur.
- Provide new prevention policies, models and practices that mitigate harmful social processes that enable bullying, celebrate difference and diversity to build inclusion, and safely and accessibly empower all students.

**Recommendation 4:** Resource more targeted interventions that address equity cohorts/intersectional needs to increase safety for everyone:

- Genuine co-design that draws on lived experience
- Strengths-based lens for all resources and policies
- Accessibility review process to prevent bias and prejudice
- Increased opportunities for agency for students with disability and their families
- Prevent the inappropriate use of exclusion against students with disability
- Inclusion and diversity training for all staff that goes beyond compliance.

**Recommendation 5:** Systematically report bullying data and measure anti-bullying policies and practice outcomes by:

- Standardising reporting and interlinking data
- Co-designing reporting methods with children and young people with disability
- Establishing clear and accessible reporting and complaint guidelines for students, teachers, staff, parents and caregivers.

**Recommendation 6:** Implement the following seven guiding principles for a National Standard responding to bullying: 1. Co-designed, 2. Human rights model, 3. Centre inclusion, 4. Explicitly anti-ableist, 5. Strengths based, 6. Accessible, 7. Evaluation framework which is timely and accountable.

# Introduction

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability (CYPWD) aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has extensive national networks of young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations. Our vision is that CYPWD in Australia will fully exercise their rights, realise their aspirations and thrive in all communities. We do this by:

- Raising community attitudes and expectations
- Championing initiatives that promote the best start in the early years for children with disability, and their families and caregivers
- Leading social change to transform education systems to be inclusive at all points across life stages
- Advocating for systems that facilitate successful life transitions to adulthood
- Leading innovative initiatives to ensure the sustainability and impact of the organisation and the broader sector.

CYDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the federal Department of Education's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Consultation. This submission builds on previous work completed by CYDA including:

- Education surveys – [preliminary results from CYDA's 2024](#) survey as well as published results from 2022 and 2023.<sup>1</sup>
- [Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal](#).
- [Submission on proposed South Australian reforms to implement Royal Commission recommendations](#).

The submission also draws significantly on evidence from both peer-reviewed articles and grey literature. The insights in the submission were also shaped by CYDA staff, the majority of whom have personal and/or family experience of disability.

## Submission Structure

**The submission is structured in two parts.** Each part leads with a summary of recommendations followed by a detailed response to the consultation questions.

**Part 1** addresses consultation **Questions 1-4** provided for 'other stakeholders'.

**Part 2** addresses consultation **Questions 5-8** provided for 'other stakeholders'.

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<sup>1</sup> CYDA, 2024. [Three in four disabled students are bullied or excluded at school, new survey reveals](#); CYDA, 2023. [Australian students with disability experiences of entrenched inequality in education](#); CYDA, 2023. ['I think the teachers need more help': Voices of students with disability in Australia](#); CYDA, 2022 & 2023. [Disappointment & discrimination: Surveys of the learning experiences of CYPWD](#).



## Part 1: The current state of play: Response to consultation questions 1-4

### Part 1 Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Critically review bullying prevention, and related policies models, and practices, using measures defined by impacted and equity cohorts, such as children and young people with disability.

**Recommendation 2.** Use co-design to develop metrics for use in the critical review (Recommendation 1) and future policies, models, and practices, to reveal and examine the social processes that enabling bullying to occur.

**Recommendation 3:** The federal Department of Education to use the outcome of the critical review to develop a comprehensive suite of relational neuroscience-informed resources, co-designed with users and equity groups. These should:

- Anchor existing successful policies, models and practices into a theoretical framework to allow for more meaningful and reflective practice to occur.
- Provide new prevention policies, models and practices that mitigate harmful social processes that enable bullying, celebrate difference and diversity to build inclusion, and safely and accessibly empower all students.

# 1. Current policies, models and practices for bullying prevention (Questions 1 and 2)

**Recommendation 1:** Critically review bullying prevention, and related policies, models, and practices, using measures defined by impacted and equity cohorts, such as children and young people with disability.

As a representative organisation in regular consultation with our community, CYDA is well positioned to comment on the education policies, models and practices that shape the experiences of children and young people with disability.

This section responds to consultation Question 1: What policies, models and practices are successful in addressing bullying, and consultation Question 2: What policies, models and practices are not working, as follows.

We first provide an overview of the key literature on bullying prevention programs. We then highlight **behaviouralism as the key conceptual framing** used by schools in general classroom management and bullying prevention programs, and link it to the persistence of bullying culture and practices. The section concludes by **introducing a new approach and describing an emerging body of evidence that supports it**.

## Literature overview

There is little agreement about the extent to which current approaches are effective to reduce bullying in schools. The peer reviewed literature, as well as evaluative content in the grey literature, does agree that programs and approaches do not work as well as expected or in the ways that were expected. Hensums et al. (2023)<sup>2</sup> undertook a meta-analysis of studies representing 39,793 children and young people across the world and found that programs were generally effective in those aged under 12 years old and predominantly for the most serious cases of 'victimisation'. Their findings discuss the lack of understanding for effectiveness of different components of programs, and lack of effectiveness for marginalised groups and less serious cases of 'victimisation'. Underscoring the limitations in our understanding of the efficacy of program components, they also found that school assemblies to educate students about bullying and increased playground supervision appeared to worsen bullying.

In their randomised controlled study of a widely used anti-bullying program in the Czech Republic, Klocek et al. (2025)<sup>3</sup> similarly revealed uncertainty about the actual mechanisms of anti-bullying programs. Their analysis of the dynamics between

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<sup>2</sup> Hensums, M et al., 2023. [What works for whom in school-based anti-bullying interventions? An individual participant data meta-analysis](#). Prevention Science Vol. 24, p.1435-1446.

<sup>3</sup> Klocek, A et al., 2025. [Longitudinal network associations between risk and protective factors for bullying, victimization, and well-being: Effects of an antibullying intervention](#). Personality and Individual Differences, Vol. 244.

bullying, victimisation and wellbeing found that although the program was effective in some ways, the individual program components did not operate as expected. In particular, empathy for victims was not related to bullying behaviour in the intervention or the control group. Also, the measures studied (social self-efficacy, empathy for victims, and decreased moral disengagement) operated differently in the intervention group compared to the control group, leading the authors to call for more work to understand this program.

In a controlled randomised trial involving 135 Australian schools, Rappee et al. (2020)<sup>4</sup> analysed the effectiveness of a commonly used whole school bullying prevention program, a targeted approach using an individualised resilience program, and a combination of both programs, against the outcomes of a control group of schools providing care as usual. They found that none of the interventions (the whole school, targeted or combined approach) had outcomes that were superior to the control group of schools providing the usual care. In fact, they stated that,

*“Over the 2 years of the study, there were surprising reductions in victimization, anxiety, and depression in the control schools, which were similar in level to those shown in the school that implemented active programs”.*

The disagreement and inconsistent approach to the theory of change, along with the variable and contradictory findings within studies such as these, **demonstrate concerning limitations in anti-bullying program approaches and analysis.**

In a departure from the individualistic psychology-based framing of bullying experiences in school, **an emerging body of research is providing a more systems and population level understanding of the phenomenon.** One study<sup>5</sup> examining weight-based bullying in schools reveals the social processes of othering and dehumanising are a key mechanism enabling the bullying of children who have been labelled as overweight. These findings underscore **the importance of drawing on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to understand common policy problems.** In this case, the researchers used humanities-based narrative analysis to learn about the experiences of children and young people who have experienced bullying and to identify the specific ways this treatment was enabled to occur (Eriksson and Horton 2025). In fact, these authors note that Sweden has moved beyond the term bullying in favour of the description ‘degrading treatment and harassment’ with the intention that each incident should be quickly addressed before it becomes bullying. Thornberg (2015)<sup>6</sup> similarly uses the concept of a social process to

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<sup>4</sup> Rappee, R et al., 2020. [Combined whole-school and targeted programs for the reduction of bullying victimization: A randomised, effectiveness trial](#). Aggressive Behaviour, Vol. 46, pp. 193-209.

<sup>5</sup> Eriksson, A & Horton, E., 2025. [‘How can you be friends with that fatty?’: The othered body in narratives on weight-based bullying](#). Children and Society Vol. 39, p.146-160.

<sup>6</sup> Thornberg, R, 2015. [School bullying as collective action: Stigma processes and identity struggling](#). Children and Society, Vol. 29, p.310-320.



frame bullying and in doing so captures the complex dynamics that are occurring. His research describes how young people co-construct their identities through social interaction and shows how bullying becomes part of this process when they collectively construct, or agree on, what is ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’, or not normal, to justify the mistreatment of others. The findings demonstrate that understanding the detail of peer and school cultures in more depth can show us what might occur in the absence of strong inclusive messages and guidance from adults.

Recognising the slow progress by bullying programs as well as limitations in earlier definitions and approaches, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2024)<sup>7</sup> has proposed **a new social and relational definition of bullying that CYDA recommends for implementation in Australia:**

*“School bullying is a damaging social process that is characterized by an imbalance of power driven by social (societal) and institutional norms. It is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community.”*

## Common conceptual framing of classroom management

Positive Behaviour Support is one of the most common classroom management models into which bullying prevention programs and tools are inserted by Australian schools. Conceived in the United States from Applied Behaviour Therapy approaches, this model was adapted for the Australian context in response to concerns about disruptive classroom behaviour. The **Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) model** is implemented under a variety of program names<sup>8</sup> in around a third of Australian schools. The model consists of three tiers of intervention (general, targeted and intensive interventions and supports) to guide schools in managing behaviour and learning outcomes of students. It largely focuses on standardising student behaviour, and measures reductions in problematic behaviour in classrooms.

**There is growing evidence that the SWPBS model has been applied without a critical understanding of the theories and assumptions that inform its use.** Since its introduction to Australian schools in 2005, a small but growing body of work in the relational neurosciences has emerged that contraindicates many of the understandings and approaches used by this behaviouralist framework. Given what we know about the higher rates of punitive and exclusion measures (e.g., suspension

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, 2024. [Defining school bullying and its implications on education, teachers and learners](#) (first developed at the International Conference on School Bullying in 2020).

<sup>8</sup> School-wide Positive Behaviour Support in NT, Tas, and Vic. Positive Behaviour for Learning in ACT, Qld, SA, NSW. Positive Behaviour Support in WA.

and expulsion) used against students with disability,<sup>9</sup> it is not surprising that ableism has been noted as a concern within this model.

The family of a child attending a school using the SWPBS model told us,

*"[child] was pulled from class, isolated in the hallway or office, or held back from breaks as a 'consequence' for his outbursts. These were not therapeutic strategies, they were punishments masked as management. The default became removal and exclusion." Carer of child with disability from the CYDA community.*

Researchers highlight the **ableism and other inequalities that have become embedded in the model** as it is implemented by schools. Poed and Fox (2023) analysed 73 SWPBS matrices of behavioural expectations used by schools across Queensland and Victoria and found that,

*"structural ableism exists in the way some expected behaviours are framed by requiring a greater response effort from students with disability if they are to meet the standard expected".<sup>10</sup>*

The researchers, one of whom (Poed) also wrote the handbook<sup>11</sup> for this model, found that a high level of receptive language skill, self-regulation, working memory, and well developed theory of mind was required to engage with the framework. An example of a behavioural expectation used by one school is, "complete adult requests cheerfully". When evaluations report on positive outcomes from SWPBS, they are typically ascribed to the model being "implemented with fidelity". However, the analysis from Poed and Fox, along with the results of CYDA's education surveys, would suggest that **this model is not being implemented with fidelity and children and young people with disability are being marginalised in educational settings as a result.**

*"Schools are cherry picking the SWPBS model for adult convenience and not student wellbeing. The staff at my son's previous school just used tier one supports for compliance even though he has a disability. Then they blamed him when he was unable to meet these expectations and didn't offer the tier two and three supports that are supposed to be part of the model. There was never any consideration for the distress behind his 'non-compliant' behaviours or how their strategies were impacting him. He was often sent into another classroom after his 'two warnings' and this caused even more distress. His peers began to mimic*

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<sup>9</sup> Disability Royal Commission, 2021. [Barriers experienced by students with disability in accessing and obtaining a safe, quality and inclusive school education and consequent life course impacts.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Poed, S & Fox, R., 2023. [Identifying and removing ableism from Tier 1 school-wide positive behaviour support practices](#), International Journal of Developmental Disabilities, Vol.69, Issue 1.

<sup>11</sup> Barker, K. et al. 2022. [School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support: The Australian Handbook.](#)

*the teacher's attitude, labeling him as 'a naughty kid' and excluding him from play. Then he was too scared to go to school and he had just turned 7. What a disasterous school expereince for such a little person."* Parent of child with disability and CYDA staff member.

Policies and practices related to suspension and expulsion are not always connected to bullying prevention. **CYDA notes that the way exclusions are managed sends a strong signal to students and their families about expectations for their treatment and the way their behaviour is understood.** Previous CYDA education survey responses demonstrated problematic use of these tools:

*"Constantly [suspended]. Teachers don't even seem to understand the purpose of 'suspension' – that is, to give them time to implement better supports. It's typically touted as a punishment for the child (or parent) or as 'down time' for the teachers to 'have a break from' the child."* Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2023.

Further responses exemplify the informal exclusion that is reported commonly by families of young people with disability.

*"My son was only allowed to go to school for two hours a day. We asked if he could stay for morning tea with the other students but they said he could not."* Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2023.

*"Advised that these events wouldn't be good for son to join and preference would be for him to stay at home. No adjustments offered."* Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2023.

CYDA's knowledge of the trajectory of exclusion comes from the lived experience of our staff and formal and informal conversations with our community. Once students begin to be excluded by attending reduced hours, not participating in formal activities with their peers, and/or spending increased time outside the classroom to manage disruptions, they become disconnected socially and emotionally from their peers. Their peers are receiving the message from the school's actions that the student with disability is different to them. This othering process leads to students with disability not feeling a sense of belonging in their school and classroom, and this uncomfortable feeling leads to additional 'disruptive' behaviours, or internalised behaviours, based on this distress. They are then further excluded because of their reactions. **The whole exclusion trajectory is enabled by the lens of behaviouralism** which considers and reacts to surface behaviours, despite the ideal use of SWPBS being to set up environments for success and understand the factors underneath the behaviour.

## A new approach

**CYDA instead proposes a relational neuroscience approach** to working with school students, that is inherently **trauma-informed**, and considers the **inner experience** and the **social and environmental context** of the student. This understanding of children's development is something the early childhood sector in Australia have more readily incorporated into their professional development and daily practice.<sup>12</sup>

In recognition of an updated scientific understanding of behaviour as well as the problematic outcomes of behavioural interventions such as restraint and seclusion, The Crisis Prevention Institute is rolling out their Reframing Behaviour Program<sup>13</sup> to educators around the world.

Encouragingly, some Australian schools and departments of education are also recognising the value and growing evidence base of the relational neuroscience approach and have introduced resources to apply it. The Department of Education in South Australia have recognised that **interoception**<sup>14</sup> – an understanding of internal felt states – is a necessary skill for students to be able to manage themselves, and have developed resources for teachers to use in their classroom practices.

Jones et al. (2024) examine the clash of behaviouralism and neuroscience paradigms in their case study style analysis of three schools. They examine the advantages and disadvantages of sanction-based (behaviouralism) versus relational-based (neuroscience) approaches to supporting students at school along with the enablers and barriers to adopting a relational approach. They found that relational approaches did not have as many concrete strategies and were not as familiar, understandable or externally observable for staff as sanction-based approaches. Staff saw sanction-based approaches as quick and easy. However, staff recognised that **although relational-based approaches took more time to develop, they were ultimately better** for developing **students' intrinsic motivation, building skills and developing the trust** which sanctions often ruptured. Staff also found that the **more compassionate lens** within relational approaches meant they were able to engage in **more problem-solving discussions** with students which developed important self-regulation skills and resulted in less time managing behaviour overall.

CYDA concludes that more work needs to be done in **moving Australian schools away from poorly implemented behaviouralism approaches** that further marginalise students with disability **and towards a whole school and program approach underpinned by relational neuroscience that encourages compassion, trust and inclusion.**

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<sup>12</sup> Community Early Learning Australia, 2025. [Understanding Neuroscience to Support Children's Behaviour](#).

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Prevention Institute, 2025. [Reframing Behaviour](#).

<sup>14</sup> Dept. of Education South Australia, 2019. [Ready to Learn: Interoception Toolkit](#).

## 2. Social processes that perpetuate bullying culture (Question 4)

**Recommendation 2:** Use co-design to develop metrics for use in the critical review (Recommendation 1) and future policies, models and practices, to reveal and examine the social processes that enable bullying to occur.

Despite decades of program delivery that predominantly intervenes in the practices and understandings of children and young people to prevent bullying behaviours in schools and online, this problem has only marginally improved and has become more complex. **CYDA urges the government to critically examine, and act on, the broad contextual factors and social processes that enable experiences of bullying to persist in schools and online.**

This section addresses Question 4 in the consultation paper, which asks about the underlying causes of bullying. To do this we look more deeply at the social and cultural processes and dominant narratives that often remain unchallenged. We draw on critical studies perspectives from academia and a human rights lens that centres the importance of lived experience to discuss the social and cultural dynamics in schools.

### Othering

Experiencing a strong sense of community and belonging in schools decreases bullying behaviours.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, environments where children are routinely ‘othered’ and their differences not acknowledged or celebrated allow bullying cultures to thrive.<sup>16</sup>

A dictionary definition of othering describes it as,

*“the act of treating someone as though they are not part of a group and are different in some way”.<sup>17</sup>*

As discussed in the previous section, **CYDA’s community has described a pattern of ‘othering’** that is heavily woven into school responses to behaviours of distress for students with disability. As shown by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse,

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<sup>15</sup> Durand, T, & Blackwell, R, 2024. [Dimensions of belonging and “othering” in middle school: Voices of immigrant and island-born Puerto Rican Adolescents](#). Journal for Education of Students Placed at Risk, Vol. 29(2), p.130-150; Slaten, C et al., 2019. [Understanding the relationship between youths’ belonging and bullying behaviour: An SEM model](#). Education and Child Psychology, Vol. 36(2), p.50-63.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, L, 2019. [Bearing witness: straight students talk about homophobia at school](#). Sex education, Vol. 19(6), p.661-674; Eriksson, A & Horton, E., 2025. [‘How can you be friends with that fatty?’: The othered body in narratives on weight-based bullying](#). Children and Society Vol. 39, p.146-160; Thornberg, R, 2015. [School bullying as collective action: Stigma processes and identity struggling](#). Children and Society, Vol. 29, p.310-320.

<sup>17</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, 2025. [Definition of Othering](#).



Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability<sup>18</sup> (DRC) as well as peer reviewed research,<sup>19</sup> students with disability are over-represented in the data on disciplinary measures. They are routinely ‘othered’ through exclusion from school, including formal and informal suspensions and expulsions and exclusion from activities and classroom life.

In CYDA’s Education Survey 2024<sup>20</sup>, we heard from our community that students with disability are experiencing enrolment gatekeeping and exclusionary practices throughout their schooling journey. Many of the exclusionary practices are ‘informal’ and therefore not captured by reporting requirements. Respondents also told us about the considerable inconsistencies in implementation of exclusion policies at a school level. Amplifying quotes in the previous section demonstrating student exclusion into hallways and away from group activities, the quote below exemplifies this experience.

*“It wasn’t official, but he was not allowed to attend school for a week whilst they put strategies in place. These were the strategies they were meant to put in place before he started school”. Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

Research demonstrates that excluding students from the classroom (or school) as part of the system of behaviour management decreases their access to direct instructional time and school engagement, which impacts their mental health and increases their risk for interacting with the criminal justice system.<sup>21</sup>

CYDA’s Education Survey data also demonstrates that **children and young people with disability often feel bullied by the institutions and staff they interact with.**

*“Teachers who didn’t understand my disability would single me out - particularly during physical education/sports classes - suggesting that I didn’t have a valid reason for not participating and was just trying to get out of joining in.” Young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

One CYDA staff member shared details of their child’s experience in a specialist educational setting.

*“After his previous school refused to believe that his distress behaviours stemmed from his disabilities, I moved my child to an independent*

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<sup>18</sup> Disability Royal Commission, 2021. [Report: Public hearing 7, Barriers experienced by students with disability in accessing and obtaining a safe, quality and inclusive school education.](#)

<sup>19</sup> McMillan, J & Jarvis, J, 2023. [Ensuring inclusive outcomes for young people with disability within school-wide positive behaviour support.](#) Chapter in ‘School-wide positive behaviour support: the Australian handbook’.

<sup>20</sup> CYDA, 2024. [Media release: three in four disabled students are bullied at school.](#)

<sup>21</sup> Dutil, S, 2020. [Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: A trauma-informed, critical race perspective.](#) Children and Schools, Vol. 42(3), p.171-178.

*specialist school for children who need a high level of support for their social and emotional development. He's doing much better but there are still moments where I think, 'you're supposed to be specialists'. One staff member responded to one of his distressed outbursts by telling another child, in front of him, 'don't worry about him, he's not very nice'. This just sets him back". Parent of child with disability and CYDA staff member.*

The practices and responses of staff set the culture and tone of schools, so when they cannot see past the surface behaviour to address the underlying unmet need or skill that needs developing, assumptions about their moral character become entrenched.

The practice of moralising the behaviour of children with disability and those who are learning and developing also occurs in the language and approach around anti-bullying policies. For instance, the label 'bully' implies a fixed character state and dehumanises child or young person who might be engaging in bullying behaviour. It is not rights or strengths-based language for policy or practice in schools.

## Environments dominated by adult decision making

School environments with **policies and practices that enable student voice and democratic decision making have been shown to drive positive and transformative outcomes** for whole school communities.<sup>22</sup> The use of student voice strategies by classroom teachers are associated with significantly higher levels of academic achievement and lower levels of absenteeism.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, environments dominated by adult decision makers that limit student agency further marginalise already marginalised students.<sup>24</sup>

Use of behaviour based models that apply punitive measures to manage student behaviour deepen inequalities and perpetuate violence in schools.<sup>25</sup>

A comprehensive study on the use of restorative practices to increase student agency and skill building in schools in the USA states the following:

*"Many schools use exclusionary discipline—such as suspensions and expulsions—to deter students from misbehaving and to protect students*

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<sup>22</sup> Kirk, M, 2025. [Student voice and agency for transformative change in matters that matter: Impactful inquiry in primary science](#). The Australian Educational Researcher: A Publication of the Australian Association for Research in Education. Vol. 52(1), p.411-430.

<sup>23</sup> Conner, C et al., 2025. [How teachers' student voice practices affect student engagement and achievement: Exploring choice, receptivity, and responsiveness to student voice as moderators](#). Journal of Educational Change. Vol. 26, p.89-118.

<sup>24</sup> Jorgensen, M et al., 2023. ['Environments of concern': Reframing challenging behaviour within a human rights approach](#). International Journal of Developmental Disabilities. Vol. 69(1), p. 95-100.

<sup>25</sup> Velez, G et al., 2025. [Rethinking behavioral reassignment in school systems: A restorative model for holistic intervention](#). Peace and Conflict. Vol. 31(2), p.180-191.

*from the harms associated with exposure to student misbehavior. Research indicates that, while often implemented with good intentions, exclusionary discipline increases (rather than deters) misbehavior and risks of dropout and juvenile and adult incarceration. Moreover, exclusionary discipline exerts secondary harms, negatively impacting school climate among those who see their peers suspended.”<sup>26</sup>*

Equally, inadequate responses towards those who have experienced harm are also driving inequality. Respondents to CYDA’s Education Survey (2024) reported **ineffective and inappropriate responses by school staff which left them feeling unheard, isolated and unsafe**. Schools without explicit policies and practices that enable student voice and engagement in restorative practices are more likely to subjectively react to each incident without understanding the broader context. Reactive responses that treated bullying as an isolated incident frequently put the burden of prevention back onto the student with disability.

*“The teacher caught one of my bullies. The next day I was told I could not go back to the oval as that’s where the bully played. So, I was punished for being bullied.” Young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

Research demonstrates that student anxiety and absenteeism increases when school staff ineffectively respond to reports of bullying.<sup>27</sup> This means **students with disability are not accessing education on an equal basis to their peers**, as is their right under the Disability Standards for Education 2005.<sup>28</sup>

## Resource stressed environments

CYDA’s consultation with our community consistently demonstrates that one of the **most common reasons cited by schools for lack of accommodations for students with disability is limitations in resourcing**. Experiences such as the following example from our recent survey, are common in resource stressed schools.

*“Was put on a limited programme of half days or if ‘behaved’ could stayed for full days but never more than 2 days a week. All excursions I had to attend and he had to travel with me in our car and not on the*

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<sup>26</sup> Hammond-Darling, S, 2023. [Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices](#). Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, W, 2017. [The Effectiveness of Policy Interventions for School Bullying: A Systematic Review](#). Society for Social Work and Research. Vol.8(1)

<sup>28</sup> Department of Education (Cth), 2005. [Disability Standards for Education](#).



*school bus with his classmates”. Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

Research into physical environments in schools also suggests that **playground design and other spatial features can play a part in bullying experiences at school**.<sup>29</sup> Further research to understand this dynamic in the Australian context is needed.

It is commonly known that teachers are leaving the industry in record numbers and their levels of stress and dissatisfaction with the profession are at an all-time high. While classroom management demand is often cited as being a causal factor, CYDA argues that their heavy administrative load coupled with lack of adequate tangible resources to support their practice underpins this trend.

In a recent longitudinal study of the impact of job demands on Australian teachers, researchers found that the steep decline in their mental health since 2011 could be best explained by an “increased sensitivity to high job demands due to the loss of job control”.<sup>30</sup> Job control, or autonomy, acts as a buffer to job demands, which the researchers note has always been high in the teaching profession. They noted that teacher mental health is an important predictor of both student outcomes and the motivation to leave the profession, but found that decreasing job demands alone would not be sufficient to address the decline in mental health. They suggest that as well as government programs to reduce administrative burden, **teachers should be provided with increased autonomy through flexible schedules, more control over curriculum design and more choice in task scheduling.**

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<sup>29</sup> Izardi, M & Hard, R., 2024. [The influence of the physical environment on social behaviour, school climate, and bullying in schools](#). Children's Geographies, Vol. 22(1), p.66-81.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, R, et al., 2025. [The growing effect of job demands on teacher mental health: Results from a longitudinal national household panel survey](#). BMC Public Health, Vol. 25 (1).

### 3. Approaches to address bullying culture (Question 3)

**Recommendation 3:** The federal Department of Education to use the outcome of the critical review to develop a comprehensive suite of relational neuroscience-informed resources, co-designed with users and equity groups. These should:

- Anchor existing successful policies, models and practices into a theoretical framework to allow for more meaningful and reflective practice to occur.
- Provide new prevention policies, models and practices that mitigate harmful social processes that enable bullying; celebrate difference and diversity to build inclusion; and safely and accessibly empower all students.

This section addresses consultation Question 3: What changes are needed to help improve bullying prevention and response, by qualifying the recommendation outlined above. Based on the need to address the factors that enable bullying discussed in the previous section – othering, limited opportunities for student agency and resource stressed environments – this section will suggest three key approaches.

#### Relational neuroscience approaches for policies, models and practices

**CYDA recommends the federal Department of Education develop a comprehensive suite of relational neuroscience resources, co-designed with users and equity groups, to roll out across states and territories.** It should include an extensive review of the evidence base and professional development components that are readily accessible for teachers.

A comprehensive model would provide the theoretical underpinning to anchor the relational approaches that are already occurring in Australian schools:

- Interoception practices
- Trauma informed practices
- Restorative practices
- Student voice practices
- Collaborative and proactive practices

- Respectful Relationships.<sup>31</sup>

As this submission has demonstrated so far, equity groups such as students with disability benefit greatly from approaches that factor in the whole context of their responses, behaviours and abilities. Looking only at what is observable during or after an event will not adequately address the needs of these groups. Nor will it deepen our understanding of the social and cultural processes of bullying that are enabled by school policies and practices.

Using relational neuroscience approaches as a framework for understanding both the learning and development of students and school cultures will enable schools to more successfully meet the requirements under DRC recommendation 7.2 – “prevent the inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline against students with disability”. Moreover, this approach is inherently strengths-based and able to support all students, including those who are engaging in bullying behaviours.

## Celebrate difference and foster belonging

**CYDA recommends prevention models that mitigate policies and practices that employ othering techniques while also building a sense of inclusion by celebrating difference and diversity across school communities.**

Research demonstrates it is easier to bully someone who you have somehow dehumanised or who you deem to ‘other’. Therefore addressing understanding of diversity would likely help to prevent some instances of bullying. In a comprehensive study on the outcomes of inclusive education, reduced incidence of bullying was cited as one important outcome, along with improved academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities and those without.<sup>32</sup> This finding was replicated more recently in a meta-analysis of the literature on the impact of inclusive practices on typically developing students in schools across the world. The authors found “increased acceptance, tolerance, and respect for individual differences” as well as predominantly neutral or slightly positive academic outcomes in students without disability.<sup>33</sup> PACER, a community run bullying prevention group in the USA, outlines why inclusion matters in bullying prevention:

*“Inclusion helps foster a sense of ‘belonging’ for all and increases the possibility that students will find meaningful connections among their peers, as well as support when they need it. When all are included and valued in the life of a community, bullying is less likely to occur”.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> Our Watch, 2025. [Respectful relationships education](#).

<sup>32</sup> Hehir, T, et al. 2016. [A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education](#).

<sup>33</sup> Kart, A & Kart, M, 2021. [Academic and social effects of inclusion on students without disabilities: A review of the literature](#). Education Sciences, Vol. 11. Issue 1.

<sup>34</sup> PACER, 2025. [Why does inclusion matter for bullying prevention](#).

The report from CYDA's 2024 Educational Survey highlights the urgent need for systemic change to prevent bullying and exclusion of students with disability. It recommends adopting more inclusive practices, providing comprehensive training to staff, and safe and effective reporting and response practices to ensure incidents are addressed promptly effectively.

## Opportunities for student voice to disrupt power imbalances

Within the broader relational neuroscience suite of resources, CYDA would like to see increased opportunities for student voice and representation for students to address the underlying factors that support cultures of bullying. We outline three possible approaches for further investigation during co-design processes.

**Student voice practices** are emerging as an effective approach to empowering students and increasing school engagement. Described as open dialogue, reciprocal feedback and an exchange of ideas between students and teachers, these practices are being recognised for improving student wellbeing and establishing positive classroom environments. Findings from a survey of 1,751 schools in the USA demonstrated a strong association between student voice practices in the classroom and student agency, improved grades and lower levels of absenteeism.<sup>35</sup> A design-based research project looking at one teaching and learning based sequence in an Australian school found that the use of student voice practices has a transformative impact on the sense of agency students had to enact positive change in school policy and their community.<sup>36</sup>

**Restorative practices** are another approach showing similar positive outcomes in schools. This set of practices includes proactive skill building for conflict resolution, community building activities, and responsive practices that resolve conflicts after they occur and help to repair relationships.

A recent study in the USA analysed survey data alongside administrative and attendance data from 20,000 students across 485 schools to understand the impact of restorative practices on student outcomes. Restorative practices included proactive community building as well as repair. The study found that use of restorative practices led to improved academic achievement, reduced suspension rates, improvements in behaviour and school safety, and closed the disciplinary gap between Black, Latino/a and White students.<sup>37</sup>

One method used in schools and the juvenile justice system, **Collaborative and Proactive Solutions**,<sup>38</sup> develops solutions to young people's problems collaboratively

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<sup>35</sup> Conner, J, et al., 2025. [How teachers' student voice practices affect student engagement and achievement: Exploring choice, receptivity, and responsiveness to student voice as moderators](#). Journal of Educational Change. Vol. 26, p.89-118.

<sup>36</sup> Kirk, M., 2025. [Student voice and agency for transformative change in matters that matter: Impactful inquiry in primary science](#). The Australian Educational Researcher, Vol. 52, p.411-430.

<sup>37</sup> Hammond-Darling, S. 2023. [Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices](#). Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>38</sup> Ross Greene, 2025. [Collaborative and Proactive Solutions](#).

rather than unilaterally. Credited with helping adults to shift their own understanding of behaviour, this approach is a comprehensive methodology for working with young people to solve problems and build skills. One Australian specialist school reported decreases in behavioural referrals and suspensions after implementing the program.<sup>39</sup>

**The above examples demonstrate the important shifts required to change the problematic culture of bullying in Australian schools.** Student voice practices ensure that tensions do not build in the classroom environment more generally, and can be further tailored to give voice to those most often marginalised by mainstream approaches – students with disability, among other equity groups. Restorative practices, when adapted to ensure access for all, can be used to build relational skills and when there has been a rupture in the relationship between students, or students and adults. Both approaches are strengths-based, respect the rights of students, and build important relational skills. They would need to be carefully implemented to ensure they can be equitably accessed by all students.

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<sup>39</sup> Thoroughgood, B, & Adcock, H., 2021. [Implementing 'Collaborative & Proactive Solutions' for students with additional needs](#), The Journal for Educators, Vol. 40(7), p.12-19.



## Part 2: Best Practice approaches: Response to consultation questions 5-8

**Recommendation 4:** Resource more targeted interventions that address equity cohorts/intersectional needs to increase safety for everyone.

- Genuine co-design that draws on lived experience
- Strengths-based lens for all resources and policies
- Accessibility review process to prevent bias and prejudice
- Increased opportunities for agency for students with disability and their families
- Prevent the inappropriate use of exclusion against students with disability
- Inclusion and diversity training for all staff that goes beyond compliance.

**Recommendation 5:** Systematically report bullying data and measure anti-bullying policies and practice outcomes by:

- Standardising reporting and interlinking data
- Co-designing effective reporting methods with children and young people with disability
- Establishing clear and accessible reporting and complaint guidelines for students, teachers, staff, parents and caregivers.

**Recommendation 6:** Implement the following seven guiding principles for a National Standard responding to bullying:

1. Co-designed
2. Human rights model
3. Centre inclusion
4. Explicitly anti-ableist
5. Strengths based
6. Accessible
7. Evaluation framework which is timely and accountable.

## 4. Best practice responses, supports and resourcing for equity cohorts (Questions 5 and 6b)

### **Recommendation 4: Resource more targeted interventions that address equity cohorts/intersectional needs to increase safety for everyone.**

- Genuine co-design that draws on lived experience
- Strengths-based lens for all resources and policies
- Accessibility review process to prevent bias and prejudice
- Increased opportunities for agency for students with disability and their families
- Prevent the inappropriate use of exclusion against students with disability
- Inclusion and diversity training for all staff that goes beyond compliance.

In response to Question 5 and 6b of the consultation paper, this section puts forward best practice approaches for equity cohorts. As well as following the seven guiding principles for a National Standard (outlined in section 6 of this submission), best practice responses for equity cohorts must be especially focused on enabling access and inclusion.

**Co-design resources and approaches with the communities who will be using them.** Co-design is not consultation.<sup>40</sup> Its processes must account for the lived experience of, and allow for decision making by, the end-users of a resource or policy. In particular, students with disability must be meaningfully included in the co-design process to ensure their needs are met by the design. The federal Office for Youth has provided a strategy on including young people in decision making that could be used by departments of education around Australia to better include students in designing their own learning environments.<sup>41</sup>

**A strengths-based lens to ensure that policies, models and practices that impact equity cohorts are not perpetuating prejudice, harmful stereotypes or othering techniques.** All resources and practices should be reviewed with this in mind. Under this lens schools should also reconsider the use of fixed, dualistic language like bully/victim and instead use terminology that recognises the complexities of context and opportunities for growth and change. This includes adopting the updated UNESCO definition of bullying.

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<sup>40</sup> The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, 2025. [Unpacking Co-Design](#).

<sup>41</sup> Office for Youth, 2024. [Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make](#).



**Accessibility review processes for all policies, models and practices to ensure students in equity cohorts are not inadvertently excluded from accessing them.**

For instance, the current expected behaviour tools such as ‘whole body listening’ might not be accessible to students with disabilities. Or if a complaints process has too many steps, it might not be accessible for someone with a print or intellectual disability.

**Considerations for equity cohorts that ensure opportunities for genuine agency in school communities.** It is critical that schools recognise the bias and prejudice that consistently prevent students from equity cohorts and their families being represented in approaches that seek to create democracy, such as student representative groups and parent committees. Recommendation 7.6 of the DRC’s final report: “Student and parental communication and relationships”, provides details for schools to effectively include students from equity cohorts and their families in the school community, including decision making that impacts their educational experiences.<sup>42</sup>

**Review all instruments that regulate exclusionary discipline to ensure they meet the standards set out in DRC Recommendation 7.2:** “Prevent the inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline against students with disability”.<sup>43</sup> CYDA is aware that formal and informal exclusion of students with disability is practiced extensively across the country. Data does not currently capture these experiences adequately, with many families stating they are forced to fill out attendance data using the ‘parent choice’ box when they have been asked to remove their child from the school. Consider the culture being created in a school where children who are struggling to meet expectations and not being accommodated are then suspended for not meeting these expectations. The normalisation of exclusion for perceived differences sends a powerful message to all students about how to treat others.

**Inclusion and diversity training for staff must go beyond basic compliance.** It should encourage school staff to challenge their own biases, and understand their role in creating safe and empowering environments for children. Training should demonstrate how the models of disability, dynamics of power, and theories of intersectionality impact their classroom practices and contribute to school culture. Staff must recognise that their own approaches and responses (or non-responses) can be experienced as bullying by students and/or contribute to the social processes that support bullying culture.

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<sup>42</sup> Disability Royal Commission, 2023. [Final Report - Volume 7, Inclusive education, employment and housing](#) (p.207).

<sup>43</sup> Disability Royal Commission, 2023. [Final Report - Volume 7, Inclusive education, employment and housing](#) (p.171).



## 5. Reporting (Question 7)

**Recommendation 5:** Systematically report bullying data and measure anti-bullying policies and practice outcomes by:

- Standardising reporting and interlinking data
- Co-designing effective reporting methods with children and young people with disability
- Establishing clear and accessible reporting and complaint guidelines for students, teachers, staff, parents and caregivers.

### Standardise reporting and interlink data

Research demonstrates that students with disability are bullied, segregated, suspended, and expelled at higher rates. However, there remain large gaps in the measuring, reporting and evaluation of educational experiences and outcomes of students with disability. To address this gap, **CYDA calls for the consistent and standardised collection of disaggregated data on school students with disability.**

As per recommendation 7.9 a. of the DRC's final report, Education Ministers should "develop data definitions and data collection methods to enable consistent and comparable reporting on educational experiences and outcomes of students with disability."<sup>44</sup> Data is published by organisations such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) about issues such as which schools students with disability attend, disparities in educational attainment and difficulties experienced at school. Yet CYDA's Education Survey is the only survey that seeks to explore the lived experiences of students with disability within education. With no consistent method to track, measure and report on bullying, it is not possible to assess its full impact on Australian students nor to measure the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies, programs and their implementation.

Similarly, there is no nationally consistent data collection on school exclusion (formal and informal suspensions and expulsion). However, most recently the Commissioner for Children and Young People in South Australia received data indicating that students with disability who were counted in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) made up 33.1% of total primary school enrolments in 2023, but accounted for 75.6% of the total number of primary school students who were suspended, or asked to be taken home.<sup>45</sup> Findings from CYDA's Parent and

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<sup>44</sup> Disability Royal Commission, 2023. [Final Report - Volume 7, Inclusive education, employment and housing](#).

<sup>45</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People South Australia, 2025. [Missing Out: Systemic discrimination of children and young people in South Australia](#).

Caregivers Education Survey 2024 similarly reported a high level of disciplinary absences (formal and informal), with 27% (60 respondents) reporting that students with disability had disciplinary absences applied. Many of these absences were linked by respondents to inadequate school supports, planning, or the experiences of bullying.

Given the connection between school culture and bullying, **CYDA recommends linking inclusion and exclusion data with bullying data at the individual school level.** This will build an evidence base to analyse the link between inclusive school culture and the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies. By increasing the linkages and availability of data, this will support policy makers to incorporate a contextualised understanding of bullying in evidence-based decision making.

## Co-design reporting mechanisms

Bullying remains under-reported in schools, with respondents to CYDA's Education Survey 2024 frequently describing reporting and complaint processes as ineffective, inaccessible, burdensome, and lacking transparency. Currently, reporting relies on the compliance of schools and teachers to document bullying reports and complaints. To address low levels of reporting, **CYDA recommends implementing accessible methods of reporting, co-designed by students with disability, parents and caregivers.** Including students in the creation of anti-bullying policies and reporting will ensure that their experiences are included in the decision-making process. Through co-designing reporting mechanisms, students will have increased engagement and ownership of anti-bullying reporting.

## Establish clear and accessible guidelines for reporting and responding to complaints

In establishing a whole-of-school approach to reporting, there is a need for **clear, standardised and accessible guidelines for reporting and responding to complaints.** To ensure bullying is responded to in a timely and effective manner, students, teachers, staff, parents and caregivers must be aware of their rights and responsibilities when bullying occurs. Alongside this, a mechanism is needed to **provide oversight, accountability and responsibility for action.** The variability of school and staff responses to bullying and exclusion reported in the CYDA Education Survey 2024 points to systemic issues in the reporting and complaint process as highlighted in the quotes below:

*“The school refused to acknowledge their duty of care to my sons emotional wellbeing and forced him to remain in the class with the bully, or insisted he would have to be the one to move, which would separate him from all of his friends.” Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

*“Every attempt to voice my concerns were ignored or brushed to the side.”  
Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

*“The school was aware but didn’t act appropriately and [the bullying] behaviour went on for 2 years. Multiple informal complaints made, school didn’t respond until complaint was formalised.” Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

*“Several complaints have been made, both at school and department level which have resulted in no action or completely being ignored.” Parent of child or young person with disability, CYDA Education Survey 2024.*

To ensure that bullying is reported and complaints are addressed, **clear guidelines and mandatory reporting must be established to enhance oversight and accountability**. Clear communication of these guidelines and the development of resources such as toolkits will support implementation. Training for teachers and schools in complaint handling, dispute resolution, inclusive school environments and reporting will not only support data collection but will help to build trust among parents, caregivers and educational institutions.

## 6. Guiding principles for a National Standard for responding to bullying (Question 8)

**Recommendation 6:** Implement the following seven guiding principles for a National Standard responding to bullying:

1. Co-designed
2. Human rights model
3. Centre inclusion
4. Explicitly anti-ableist
5. Strengths based
6. Accessible
7. Evaluation framework which is timely and accountable.

1. The Standard must be **co-designed** and tested for use across multiple contexts and cohorts. Given the harm experienced by so many children and young people with disability, it is critical not to inadvertently cause further harm.
2. The Standard should use a **human rights model** accounting for the role of power in adult practices and policies, student voice and agency. It should prioritise relational and environmental understandings (relational neuroscience approach) of student behaviours rather than outdated behaviourist theories using rewards and consequences.
3. The Standard should centre inclusion and be **inclusive of all identities**. Whole-of-school approaches must not dilute the tailored responses needed for intersecting communities such as young people who have a disability and are also First Nations, LGBTIQA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, and/or are in out-of-home care.
4. The Standard should be **explicitly anti-ableist**. All policies, models and practices should be tested against anti-ableist criteria, designed by the communities impacted by previous ableist policies, practices and programs.
5. The Standard should use **strengths-based** framing focusing on the skills and conditions to aspire to, rather than problematising cohorts, individuals or observable behaviours.
6. All policies and programs associated with the National Standard should be **accessible** and available in multiple formats.
7. The standard should be **evaluated** in a timely manner and in accordance with measures of success determined in the original process to co-design the guiding principles.



## Appendix: Case Study – young child with disability attending primary school

Leo,<sup>46</sup> 6 years old, has a formal diagnosis of Autism and ADHD and attends a government primary school in Melbourne, Victoria.

Since starting Foundation in 2024, Leo has experienced harm from peers, staff and the policies and practices of the school culture. His family has been highly involved in advocating for his disability related needs and accommodations and responding to multiple incidents of bullying.

### Peer bullying and exclusion

Leo experienced multiple incidences of peer violence within his first year at school. Soon after starting school, Leo was hit in the face with a stick causing swelling and a cut. In a later incident he was held down and kicked in the mouth causing bleeding.

*“These incidents were part of a wider pattern that included luring vulnerable children to a corner of the yard without supervision. No teacher witnessed these events, and no formal action followed. Despite multiple injuries, peer witness accounts, and our immediate reports to staff, the school refused to act, placing the burden on Leo—a 6-year-old with known communication challenges—to name the perpetrators. When he couldn’t, we were told nothing could be done.” Parent/carer of Leo.*

Other children with disability at the same school also experienced exclusion, bullying and violence, with no effective oversight or intervention.

*“When a six-year-old is being assaulted at school and there is no one to help, that is a failure not just of the school—but of the entire system meant to protect them.” Parent/carer of Leo.*

### Institutional harm and power imbalance

Leo also experienced consistent bullying from adults, via exclusion and institutionalised neglect. Rather than implement accommodations, teachers punished Leo for dysregulation and *“managed (Leo) as a behavioural problem rather than a child needing support” (Parent/carer of Leo)*. Leo’s neuropsychological report outlined recommended supports in line with the School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework used by the school, and engaged family advocates. Recommendations for Tier 1 and 2 strategies included:

- An Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- Structured routines
- Visual cues

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<sup>46</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy.

- Strategies for co-regulation
- Behaviour support plan

The school failed to implement any of these supports, citing a lack of training or funding. Instead staff instead labelled Leo as “disruptive” and excluded him from the classroom and punished him for distress linked to unmet needs.

*“The default became removal and exclusion, with no meaningful adjustments made. His learning was disrupted not by his disability, but by the school’s refusal to accommodate it.” Parent/carer of Leo.*

When Leo’s family raised concerns, the school denied, minimised and dismissed them. Leo’s parents highlighted the problematic *“imbalance of power between school leadership and families, particularly those advocating for neurodivergent children. We were left trying to convince those in power that our son’s safety mattered.”* Parent/carer of Leo.

This reflects a harmful power imbalance and a school culture which enables bullying to occur without accountability.

*“They minimised assaults, framed Leo’s distress as “behavioural,” and resisted accountability at every step. This kind of gaslighting is a form of bullying, it uses the authority and power of educators to silence families, cast doubt on lived experience, and suppress accountability.”* Parent/carer of Leo.

### **What could have been done differently**

Leo’s parents said that their experience would have been much better if there was collaboration with them and their allied health team, clarity on what the process was, empathy from the school, and immediate action from the school after bullying.

Leo and his parent’s experience clearly illustrate the issues with lack of resourcing of schools that led to a failure to implement the SWPBS framework. This placed the onus and blame onto Leo and his family, and left them feeling unheard and unsupported. This example clearly shows the need for more decisive responses to harm, training and resourcing in schools, as well as overarching relational approaches that centre compassion and inclusion.

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