



Resilient

STUDENTS AT THE AUSTRALIAN BALLET SCHOOL DO MORE THAN STRETCHING TO PREVENT INJURY; THEY ALSO ENJOY A PREVENTIVE PROGRAM THAT PROMOTES THEIR OVERALL WELLBEING AND ADDRESSES BULLYING. **DEBRA FERGUSON** AND **LUCINDA SHARP** EXPLAIN.

As Australia's national centre for elite vocational classical dance, The Australian Ballet School (ABS) caters for students from all over Australia, New Zealand and beyond. The ABS, situated in Melbourne's arts precinct, provides training that prepares its young students for life as professional dancers. For interstate and international students, who usually come into the full-time course when they're around 14 or 15 years of age, coming to Melbourne often means leaving the security of friends and family. The ABS becomes their new community, so creating a sense of belonging, connection and security are very important.

To that end, the ABS has for the past six years been supporting a unique program, Connecting to School Community (CSC), which focuses on building a respectful school community built on positive regard, a sense of security and authentic communication. Originally based on the research

of the Gatehouse Project, from the Centre for Adolescent Health at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, the program involves the whole school community – students, staff, and parents. Its focus recognises that it's possible to create sustainable long-term positive changes in attitudes and behaviour.

Complementing the CSC program, and unique to the ABS, is a five-year performance psychology curriculum. Both programs use the concepts of positive psychology, and a social and emotional learning framework centred on self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills and social awareness. Students are trained to build the skills of being positive, empathetic and proactive, and making deliberate choices in both dance and life. Building a worthwhile sense of self helps students to be resilient and courageous through the tough times they'll inevitably face.



Both programs recognise the link between being an open, enriched person and success as a dancer. They also recognise that, in the real world, not everyone is respectful and just, and that our students may face instances of bullying.

Bullying

Common to all forms of bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence is the abuse of power, where a more powerful person or group oppresses a less powerful person or group. Bullying typically extends over time and takes many forms – verbal, physical, relational and cyber. In cases of cyberbullying the bully can't see their target – and the emotional impact of their bullying – or their potentially worldwide audience.

Awareness of the destructiveness of bullying in Australian schools has developed over the past 20 years, yet despite all the interventions and financial input bullying still occurs at an alarming rate.

Like any other school in Australia, the ABS has its fair share of bullies and targets. What makes the ABS stand out, though, is its long-term commitment to creating a culture based on respect and empathy. Cultural change doesn't just happen. There has been a deliberate leadership choice to invest time and money in providing students with an opportunity to focus on life apart from dance and academia, and on educating the staff and involving the parents.

Oh my god, there's a worried parent on the phone

That phone call from a parent about bullying can fill a school with dread. Despite the availability of research articles, bullying and harassment programs, and advice on handling bullying situations, there is rarely a simple solution and teachers can feel powerless to make a difference. The more that we learn about bullying the more it seems to be a pervasive human behaviour, particularly in competitive school and work environments. The question then arises, can we ever stop bullying behaviours?

Our experience at the ABS tells us that changing the behaviour of targets is much more effective than trying to change the bully's behaviour. We also know that prevention is better than intervention, particularly the type that helps develop a resilient mental attitude, assertiveness, personal power, belief in self and the courage to stand up for oneself.

At the ABS, our aim is to decrease the number of targets which then decreases the ways in which bullies can abuse power. Our experience is backed up by well-known author, Evelyn Field, who says that the adversarial approach to bullying doesn't work. Empowering targets and creating respectful communities, says Field, is the way to go.

What makes a target?

Any difference in children – being a geek, say, or being a 'ranga,' being fat, wearing glasses, wearing the 'wrong' clothes – can attract bullies to misuse power. Many ABS students have experienced bullying before coming to the school, just because they're a dancer.

There are some people who, when targeted by a bully, have the confidence to stand up to them. These people retain their sense of self and are able to feel and remain powerful. For others, though, it's not so easy. These are the ones who get hurt because they don't have the inner strength to stand up for themselves. They have no awareness of their own power and how they can use it.

For those who are hurt by bullies, the impact can be enormous and long lasting, affecting the way they live, learn and play. What we know is the importance of helping these young people build healthy self-esteem.

The role of self-esteem

In competitive environments, many young people learn that *what they do* and *how well they do it* is intimately related to their self-worth. If children are constantly given attention and praise by parents and teachers for their achievements, they can begin to think, 'I am worthwhile when I achieve,' 'People notice me when I achieve,' 'People like me when I achieve.' Conversely, when

they feel like they aren't achieving, their sense of self and the way they value themselves can be diminished and have a negative impact on every aspect of their life. Then everything becomes hard.

Although schools are there to help young people achieve, curriculum demands focus on academic results rather than emotional competence, and what young people *do* can become more important than *who they are*. This has the potential to lead to low or unstable self-esteem.

Josh's story

Josh* is 14 years of age and has been dancing for six years. He first experienced bullying at age 11 when his mates found out he went to dance lessons – something he had tried to keep secret for fear of their reactions. Josh's parents reported the bullying to the school principal. After several unsuccessful attempts by teachers to rein in the bullies, Josh was eventually enrolled at another school.

For a short time life improved for Josh, but things took a turn for the worse when he entered secondary school. Despite Josh joining in sporting activities and trying to be 'one of the boys,' he once again found himself the target of the bullies. A decision was made by school staff to 'protect' Josh by isolating him from the bullies. Although this meant that Josh didn't have to cope with bullying, it also meant that he never learned how to stand up for himself and also missed out on developing his social skills and empathy.

Josh's parents were delighted when Josh was accepted into the ABS. They believed that now he would be surrounded by like-minded young people and would feel safe, but Josh's learned helplessness meant that any banter or innocent teasing by his peers was construed by Josh as bullying. What Josh had to learn was that he had power like everyone else and it was up to him what he did with it – he could let others take it away or he could use it respectfully to stand up for himself.

At the ABS, CSC group sessions assisted Josh to understand the importance of self-respect, power and empathy. He participated in practical exercises to understand

trust and, most importantly, to appreciate the impact of his reactions when he believed others were bullying him. You see, Josh had learned to be a target and his peers knew it. Firstly Josh needed some practical skills in blocking perceived bullying behaviours. This was as simple as learning how to have a neutral facial expression, choosing how to respond to what happened to him and regulating his emotional response. In helping Josh build some inner strength and power, he also had to learn to make friends and to feel connected in the school community.

At the same time, Josh's peers were learning more about him as well as building their own self-awareness. A significant catalyst for these changes occurred while creating a class code of conduct. In order to determine how

they wanted to feel in the school, the students shared what was important to them, including past experiences – good and bad. They had to learn to trust themselves and others in the group to enable this sharing. They decided they wanted to feel respect, trust, empathy and security within the group. This code became the basis on which relationships were managed and helped students understand that they couldn't be bystanders when others were being bullied – they needed to stand up for each other.

What happens to the bully?

While the ABS programs focus on changing the responses of targets, that doesn't mean the bullying is being ignored. The ABS recognises its legal and ethical responsibilities

to make reasonable attempts to deal with bullying; however, by creating a respectful and open culture where people feel safe to report, we've found that we're typically managing bullying concerns in the early stages – a time when it's easier to confront the misuse of power.

What can teachers do?

To many students, teachers are what psychologists would call 'significant others.' Along with parents, siblings and close friends, teachers have considerable influence on the development of their students' thinking, emotions and behaviour. As potentially powerful role models, teachers can choose whether their influence is positive or negative. Simply the way teachers move around

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Teachers need high levels of self-respect to consistently model assertiveness, honest communication and empathy for others. Teaching is a stressful profession and teachers need to be resilient to cope.

the school, say, or communicate and deal with conflict can have a profound impact on young people far into the future. If you think back to your own student days, you may recognise the influences, both positive and negative, that your teachers had on your personal development and on how you approach your teaching today.

Of course, teachers are people too and can have the propensity to be bullies or targets. Teachers need high levels of self-respect to consistently model assertiveness, honest communication and empathy for others. Teaching is a stressful profession and teachers need to be resilient to cope. Stressful times can challenge our sense of self-worth making it harder to cope and to model appropriate behaviour. This is where it is a school's responsibility to invest in their teachers; to put wellbeing on the agenda and set acceptable standards to work by. Then everyone benefits.

All staff members have a responsibility to have a positive impact on their school's culture. If incompetent leadership is enabling a bullying culture, then individual teachers need to take a stand and put respect and wellbeing on the school agenda.

What's the outcome?

The ABS investment and commitment to systemic and ongoing change throughout the whole school community is setting a best-practice standard and is creating a culture of excellence in a professional, proactive and committed way.

The ABS programs assist students to see themselves as a person first and foremost and to take pride in who they are. We want students to respect and like themselves and to understand that happy and engaged people learn better, build stronger communities and lead more enriched lives.

Reading this article, you may think, 'This is just another thing we have to do.'

We think it's too important *not* to do. **T**

** Not his real name. The Josh case study draws on details from different scenarios compiled over six years of the program.*

Debra Ferguson is an education consultant and author, whose passion and commitment is to inspire and motivate people to effectively manage their increasing professional and personal demands. Her latest book is What Teachers Need to Know about Personal Wellbeing, published by the Australian Council for Educational Research. She knows firsthand the demands of both schools and the teaching profession and combines her experience and ongoing research, by training and motivating members of schools to create safe, engaged and healthy communities.

From 1974, Lucinda Sharp spent 10 years as a dancer with The Australian Ballet and then another 10 years involved in staging professional dance. She then trained as a psychologist to help young dancers achieve their performing arts dreams. Employed as the first full-time psychologist at The Australian Ballet School, Melbourne, she helps young dancers prepare for the emotional rigours of the dance profession and assists those whose lives ultimately take different directions. Awarded a Churchill Trust Fellowship in 2003, she travelled to London, Birmingham, Paris, Toronto and New York to look at ways of improving psychological functioning among dancers in vocational training environments. She is an accomplished speaker and workshop presenter and has worked with people from all walks of life.

LINKS

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Australian Ballet School students. Photo by John Tsiavis courtesy The Australian Ballet School.

For information on Evelyn Field, visit www.bullying.com.au/school-bullying/index.php