

Researchers call for policy shift to focus on middle years of schooling

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A significant number of students in the middle school years across Australia have emotional and behavioural problems and experience high rates of bullying that can negatively affect their long-term health and learning, according to a new policy brief from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI).

The policy brief, developed by [The Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study \(CATS\)](#) team at MCRI, addresses a shortfall of research and policy updates into middle childhood (8-14 years) despite the biological upheavals of puberty and its associated significant brain changes.

On top of a lack of focus on middle years policy, the report stresses the added challenges of off-site learning during COVID-19 may have a huge effect on these students during this sensitive developmental phase. Many middle years students would potentially find it difficult to catch up without proper support, it stated.

It also comes as new research, led by MCRI and published in *Academic Pediatrics*, showed rates of bullying between Grades 3 and 8 were high. The

study found 86 percent of students reported being bullied at least once in the past four weeks, 66 percent reported frequent bullying and 37 percent reported frequent bullying in multiple forms such as physical and verbal attacks.

MCRI Dr. Lisa Mundy said puberty dominated the middle years, bringing a surge in physical, biological, social and emotional growth.

"This is a sensitive and significant developmental period that we describe as a 'developmental switch point,' when the impact of positive interventions, such as supporting strong peer relationships and reducing bullying, might be at their greatest," she said.

"Children begin looking beyond their family groups to engage more with peers. They develop the behaviours and skills which promote lifelong health and wellbeing, but for a significant number, this stage can be destabilising and can negatively impact their [long-term health](#) and learning.

"Many emotional and behavioural problems begin in the middle years. Problems with peer groups, bullying and difficulty adjusting to [secondary school](#) frequently cause further loss of learning and increase the risk of mental health problems including depression and suicide."

Dr. Mundy said educators were capable of successfully identifying students in the primary years that were likely to encounter issues when they enter Grade 7, they just needed more support within the sector to take the necessary actions.

MCRI Professor George Patton said the Academic Pediatrics research, with 1239 students recruited in Grade 3 from 43 Melbourne [primary schools](#), found that boys experienced a decline in bullying with increasing age whereas bullying of girls persisted at [high rates](#) into secondary [school](#).

"With bullying persisting longer for girls, there is a need for greater efforts in bullying prevention and promoting positive peer relationships for girls in their transition to secondary school. This is particularly important because bullying is one of the clearest risk factors for mental health problems during these years," he said.

"For girls, cyber-bullying increased sharply in the early teens, but most bullying interventions have been classroom-based prevention programs focused on problem-solving and [social skills](#)."

Additionally, half of all mental health issues emerge by age 14, with symptoms starting in primary school. In a classroom of 25 children in Grade 3, about five students will have emotional problems and about five [behavioural problems](#). On average these students' numeracy skills are a year behind their peers when they start high school.

Professor Patton said there was a normal shift in child-parent relationships during the middle years, which should be seen as an opportunity.

"Parental engagement in learning and parent-child communication helps personal development, reduces risky behaviours and leads to fewer mental health issues. The current rise in remote learning is a chance for parents to become more actively involved with their child's learning," he said.

But Professor Patton warned remote learning and physical distancing during COVID-19 may have a disproportionate effect on students during this critical developmental phase.

"Students who fall behind may find it very difficult to catch up without proper support. Physical distancing and further remote learning will undoubtedly affect relationships with friends and other students," he said.

The policy brief found Australia required a health promoting framework to support middle year students aimed at strengthening social and emotional learning, improving the primary to secondary school transition, and enabling more effective links between education and health services.

Key recommendations include:

- Investment in educator training to improve knowledge of the middle years' developmental and psychological stages
- Provide practical advice on promoting healthy peer relationships, preventing and responding to bullying and cyber-bullying and strengthening [student](#)-educator relationships
- Creating positive physical and social environments in schools such as green spaces, integration of indoor and outdoor learning and modernising classroom layouts
- Supporting mental health services integration and social and emotional skills development into the school system at all year levels
- Encouraging and supporting educators to voice concerns about students to the child, their parents and school counsellors
- Strengthening support systems by investing in teacher aides and school counsellors, ensuring continuity of support for at-risk students as they transition to secondary school, encourage parent/caregiver engagement in learning such as community events or regular learning updates

More information: Shinya Fujikawa et al. Bullying across late childhood and early adolescence: a prospective cohort of students assessed annually from Grades 3 to 8, *Academic Pediatrics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.acap.2020.10.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2020.10.011)

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