

Why is bullying an issue in the early childhood workforce?

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We often hear about the need to attend to bullying in schools, and yet workplace bullying is alive and flourishing in many organisations. This article explores the concept of workplace bullying and what this might mean in and for the field of early childhood education.

Many of us have experienced situations in which we felt marginalised or our expertise was not valued. We may have thought we were not listened to, our ideas diminished or our capacity to enact change severely questioned. Such experiences do not constitute bullying if they are of a one off nature.

Most definitions of bullying see it as a specific activity that is systematic and usually directed towards particular individuals. Simple definitions refer to the repetition of negative behaviours in the workplace such that the person feels threatened or humiliated by the repeated negative incidents (Curtis, Ball & Kirkham, 2006).

What does bullying look like?

According to Quine (1999) bullying includes intimidatory tactics, belittling professional status, threats to personal standing (through name calling, insults and teasing), isolation (through withholding information and professional development), overwork (through impossible deadlines), demeaning of expertise through meaningless tasks and removal of responsibilities. It is typically directed towards one or selected individuals and includes some systematic and enduring elements resulting in a hostile or unpleasant work environment (Salin, 2003).

Usually bullying includes the impact on the victim and not the intention of the bully, the negative effect on the victim which causes stress and lower self confidence, and finally the persistence of the bullying act (Quine, 1999).

The consequences of bullying vary considerably. According to Salin (2001) the impacts include higher staff turnover or intent to leave, higher absenteeism, decreased commitment and productivity, lower levels of job satisfaction, psychosomatic symptoms, physical illness and possible expulsion from the labour market (p. 1214). Others such as (Cowie, et al, 2000) report increased strain in the workplace, reduced wellbeing and motivation, as well as a reduction to efficiency. In nursing literature where horizontal violence and lateral violence are frequently investigated, suicide is even noted as final resort for some victims (Griffin, 2004). Given the breadth and possible severity of consequences it appears important to examine this workplace phenomenon to avoid such negative outcomes.

Research on the early childhood field has identified a culture strongly underpinned by a caring and nurturing ethos (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). However, such a work environment has also elicited elements of horizontal violence (negative behaviour towards co-workers) as described by Hard (2006) and extensively explored in the nursing literature (Duffy, 1995). This work indicates that there is a tension between the strong requirements of a highly feminised field

where care is a daily requirement, for example nursing.

Voices from the field

An early childhood academic reflecting on her previous work in early childhood services commented that '[EC services] are little environments of conformity and, of course, like-minded ideas group together'. This can have the effect of suffocating people 'and if there's any difference again, you're not accepted'. She continued suggesting that she felt that in fact it was her peers that held her back the most.

Others from the early childhood field indicate that they had witnessed behaviours by co-workers where staff were marginalised or humiliated for different practices, prevented from trying new things, experienced derogatory comments about programs and were excluded from social activities (Hard, 2008). Students on professional experience placements have reported quickly identifying a service expectation to conform to existing practice and a limited capacity to try new things or enact different approaches to those used in the service. In single cases these experiences may not prove damaging or represent bullying or horizontal violence. However, if of a repetitive nature and enacted by a person in power it may constitute bullying. If on-going and exercised by a peer it could be horizontal violence.

Positive aspects of discussing bullying

There are two positive aspects to the discussion of bullying in the early childhood workforce. First, it raises the possibility of conversing about how we as professionals engage with each other and allows us to frankly examine the motivations behind behaviours which are potentially damaging to others and the culture of our field. Second, it affords the knowledge and language to begin open conversations to critique such behaviours. This empowers us to create new workplace cultures. Recognising such behaviours and knowing they have terms and definitions can assist us to challenge them and ensure we do not tolerate such cultures.

As Griffin (2004) suggests, 'the goal of the educational process of teaching about lateral violence is to liberate the oppressed individuals by helping them to see that stopping the dominant group or individual from oppressing them is within their capabilities' (p. 258).

The early childhood field has much to celebrate and many skills to acknowledge and share. Engagement in bullying and horizontal violence is destructive for the perpetrator, the victim and subsequently for the field. Let us confront these behaviours and support a culture where we embrace discussion and debate without fear of marginalisation, build robust professional identities and support each other to achieve.

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