

Dear Parents

It was clear at our conference here a couple of weeks ago that bullying occurs in all schools and, although it is often more overt with boys, girls too can be cruel to one another (and to boys). I imagine most of us can remember being bullied or bullying or both. I can clearly remember a senior boy trying water-torture techniques he had heard about on us just for fun. They were effective and he had fun. I imagine, if asked, he would have trotted out the well-worn phrases, “It will toughen them up! It is good for them.”. Personally I do not believe bullying someone ever does them any good at all. As Gary Koen pointed out at the conference, breaking people down in order to build them up may be good in the army where you are going to order rational creatures to put their bodies in the way of fast moving metal objects, but it is not good for ordinary life in society. Bullying distorts people and should be opposed in all schools – hence the title of the conference “Bully-Free Schools”.

Gary Koen got us off to a good start and spoke with passion against bullying. He acknowledged that many schools have good policies around bullying but questioned whether they were actually doing enough to stop the bullying. He called on us all to ask hard questions about what actually takes place in our schools. How does the example of staff show boys how they should treat one another? Do they experience kindness? Is the general climate one that protects or exposes the bully? You cannot have schools free of bullies but they should experience severe restrictions by the climate created and this climate should be thought through and nurtured – not just a result of chance. Does the praise of successful sportsman over other more gentle pursuits create a climate in which bullies can flourish? This train of thought was strongly underlined by Desmond Painter when he spoke about the “cultural capital” in a school and how we have the power to alter the “cultural capital” to reduce the power of the bully. He used the example of Xhosa. “What is the cultural capital for a boy being able to speak Xhosa in your school? Not much? How do you change this?”. He gave us cause to ponder. I think at Bishops we have moved a long way towards creating a climate in which a multitude of skills are admired but it remains the non-sporty types who are more likely to be bullied, especially amongst the younger boys. We need to keep asking questions and looking at ourselves.

There were many other speakers but there is not space now. Another time...

Yours sincerely

Peter Westwood
(Deputy Headmaster Pastoral)