# female-on-female bullying in australian schools harms workplace wellbeing and morale



In Australian schools, a significant yet often overlooked issue is emerging within staffrooms: female-on-female bullying characterized by subtle, psychological tactics rather than physical confrontation. This creeping problem is impacting workplace trust, wellbeing, and morale amidst an already challenging educational environment.

Vanessa Vershaw, an award-winning workplace psychologist, examines this phenomenon in her forthcoming book, ‘The Sisterhood Paradox: The Psychology of Female Aggression at Work’. Drawing on insights from evolutionary psychology and social norms, she sheds light on how female-directed workplace aggression manifests and affects school environments, particularly in female-dominated sectors like education, where women comprise roughly 72% of the workforce and hold many leadership positions.

Vershaw explains to The Educator that in K-12 schools, female bullying typically takes covert but powerful forms. Psychological tactics such as gaslighting—making victims question their own perception of reality—alongside "white-anting," which involves undermining a colleague’s competence or credibility, are prevalent. Social exclusion is common as well, with targeted individuals often being silently shut out from meetings and crucial conversations. More recent trends include fat-shaming and mobbing, where multiple colleagues converge to harass a single person.

These behaviours are not limited to behind-the-scenes interactions. Within leadership ranks, bullying can become overt, including public humiliation, shouting matches, and psychological abuse. Such a culture fosters fear, replaces mentorship with manipulation, and can influence student behaviour negatively due to the modelling of toxic dynamics by staff.

Vershaw stresses the need for a cultural shift beyond mere policy updates, advocating for accountability that prevents such behaviours from festering. She outlines practical advice for school leaders to detect and address covert bullying effectively without perpetuating harmful stereotypes or harming team dynamics.

Significantly, she references the case of Charlotte O’Brien to highlight the severe consequences of unaddressed bullying in educational settings, underscoring leadership’s critical role in setting behavioural standards and preventing toxicity.

In practical terms, Vershaw encourages schools to: clearly define and name bullying behaviours; maintain zero tolerance through formal reporting and enforcement; and foster workplace cultures prioritising safety, inclusivity, and collaboration. Recruitment processes should be refined to ensure candidates align with these values.

Regarding the creation of psychologically safe environments, principals and department heads are advised to rigorously assess their school cultures, model fearless leadership that supports reporting without fear, confront internalised biases among staff about speaking out, and enforce real consequences for offenders. She notes that Employee Assistance Programs alone do not suffice unless actively utilised and supported by leadership commitment.

The broader impact of unresolved female-to-female bullying extends to heightened burnout and attrition among educators, a profession already emotionally taxing. Vershaw points out that many female staff members do not report bullying due to fears of retaliation or doubts about meaningful change, contributing to loss of morale and valuable teaching talent. She cites data from the Australian Productivity Commission, indicating that workplace bullying costs the national economy approximately $60 billion annually, with burnout and absenteeism among women significantly contributing to this figure.

System leaders are urged to openly acknowledge bullying, build robust confidential reporting systems backed by genuine action, and shift school cultures toward proactive, psychologically safe environments that value and protect educators.

‘The Sisterhood Paradox: The Psychology of Female Aggression at Work’ is set for release on 1 May 2025, promising to bring deeper understanding and dialogue to this underexplored aspect of workplace dynamics within Australian schools and beyond.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/breaking-the-silence-on-femaleonfemale-bullying-in-schools/287030> - This article corroborates the emergence of female-on-female bullying in Australian schools, emphasizing its subtle and psychological nature, the impact on trust and morale, and the predominance of women in the educational workforce and leadership roles, as discussed by Vanessa Vershaw.
2. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-individuals/guides/bullying-and-harassment/> - This source supports the description of various forms of workplace bullying in education, including psychological tactics, the stress of the educational environment, and the importance of policies and support systems to address bullying.
3. <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/breaking-the-silence-on-femaleonfemale-bullying-in-schools/287030> - The Educator article details specific covert tactics such as gaslighting, white-anting, social exclusion, fat-shaming, and mobbing as forms of female bullying in schools, matching the behaviors Vanessa Vershaw describes.
4. <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/breaking-the-silence-on-femaleonfemale-bullying-in-schools/287030> - This source also confirms the escalation of bullying to overt psychological abuse and public humiliation within school leadership, affecting workplace culture and student modeling of behavior.
5. <https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/200001-10.pdf> - This report supports the importance of tailored school responses to bullying and highlights the role of leadership and culture in managing school workplace bullying, resonating with Vershaw's call for cultural change and accountability.
6. <https://www.womensweekly.com.au/news/bullying-in-school/> - This investigation into bullying in schools supports the severe consequences of workplace bullying, including impacts on wellbeing and the need for cultural shifts and leadership accountability addressed by Vanessa Vershaw.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMirAFBVV95cUxQbV9qMkxRcDc1elR0d19WR2NFR2QxWnMydFBmNHFEeWM0UENUMm02SnBnelJ1UlA4cy1valJkckxwYVlKcE1KcXpHNHM3OFM5aHIwV0dpTjViaV94TllyYXlNWlVpMFNyT1hyMXVNUlhwMG5abG11dWx5bzVPYm1nQ3k0NmJyS1U5NlFvN2VhX1hZOWFOSWx6MkFuTUJmQkZDUHpTOV9lcHJjdmlf?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data