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School Bullying Distress Surges Beyond COVID Peaks, Affecting Children as Young as 10

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School bullying in Australia has reached alarming levels, with distress rates among children as young as 10 now surpassing those recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic. This surge is driven by both online and in-person abuse. This article examines the escalating crisis, its impact on

young students, and the urgent need for effective interventions, drawing on recent data and expert insights.

Kids Helpline, a national crisis counselling service, reports a sharp increase in calls from children aged 10 to 14 experiencing severe emotional distress due to bullying, with some expressing suicidal thoughts. “We’re seeing significant growth in distress levels, especially among younger children,” said chief executive Tracy Adams, noting that rates now exceed those recorded during COVID lockdowns (ABC News, 22 July 2025). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which surveyed 8,500 adults, found that 28.7% reported being bullied at school, with no improvement across generations, signalling a failure of existing anti-bullying measures (University of Queensland, July 2025). The study highlights that bullying, both physical and verbal, persists alongside a rise in cyberbullying, with 26.5% of students aged 13–17 experiencing online abuse in 2023, up from 16.7% in 2016 (Patchin & Hinduja, 2024).

The impact is profound. Victims face increased risks of depression, anxiety, and academic decline, with 27.8% reporting negative effects on self-esteem and 19.7% on schoolwork (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Cyberbullying, often via messaging apps and social media, extends abuse into homes. Cases such as 10-year-old Charlie Ford, who faced threats and social exclusion online, illustrate the toll. Her mother, Serena Ford, recounted overhearing peers urging self-harm, met with defiance when confronted (ABC News, 22 July 2025). The Australian Federal Police’s Centre to Counter Child Exploitation noted a 27.7% rise in reports of child image-based abuse and cyberbullying from 2022 to 2024.

Critics argue that schools and policymakers have failed to curb this crisis, with anti-bullying programs showing “no meaningful change” over decades, according to Dr Hannah Thomas of the University of Queensland (July 2025). The reliance on outdated strategies and lack of robust digital safety measures leave children vulnerable. As distress rates climb, urgent action is needed to protect young Australians from the lasting scars of bullying.