

# 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference on Children's Wellbeing

## Bullying: The Child's Perspective

Your Excellencies,

Honourable Ministers,

Members of Parliament,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

**It is my pleasure to welcome you all today, to this first National Conference on Children's Wellbeing.**

**Wellbeing is the theme of choice this week, where last Wednesday, the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, focused on wellbeing in adults, and today, our centre of attention turns to the wellbeing of children.**

**This conference is the first of an annual series of events that focus exclusively on the wellbeing of children, in recognition of the distinct set of rights, protection, and attention which they must be afforded from listening adults.**

**In this inaugural conference, the Foundation has chosen to focus on the topic of bullying, in collaboration with the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health of the University of Malta.**

**This is a subject which is particularly close to my heart, and which is causing great concern to me.**

**Since I came to the Presidency, I embarked on a program of visits to schools in Malta and Gozo, covering private, church, and state sectors respectively.**

**The aim of my visits is to create a safe and child-friendly space for dialogue, whereby children are engaged to speak about what makes them happy. Children are truly open and frank during their conversations with me, illustrating many issues that make them happy as well as those that affect their wellbeing negatively.**

**One very common issue that arises every time in one way or other is the issue of bullying. This is a predominant concern amongst our children and young people.**

**The issue emerges in almost every school I visit, each time children speak of different forms of bullying, including physical harm, verbal abuse, and forced isolation.**

**I must stress that those children attending schools having a policy on Bullying, fare much better, and in fact, do not experience bullying at school.**

**With this in mind, I encourage all schools to devise and put in place a policy on bullying, and to share best practices with one another, for the sake of the children.**

**Children consider bullying to be instigated by a number of factors, including their particular family circumstances, their physical appearance, their race or cultural background, gender and even whether or not they wear glasses.**

**It upsets me greatly to think that not only do children experience these forms of abuse, but this abuse might be prompted by factors which are central to who these children are - in other words, the elements which make up their own unique and individual selves, and their own personal sense of identity.**

**I find it difficult to imagine what it must be like for a child struggling with his or her sexuality or gender identity at school, in a context where there is some fear and reluctance to provide the necessary support and freedom for children to be who they really are.**

**Here I must mention specifically Church schools, where I experienced sensitive reactions on sexuality and gender identity.**

**I distinctly remember two Church school visits, where, in one instant, a teenage boy shared his own personal experience with me of coming out.**

**He explained that, had it not been for the supportive and receptive environment created by the school authorities and his classmates, he would not have been able to be at peace with himself, and to publicly acknowledge his own identity in the way that he did.**

**His palpable fear was that he would be bullied and unaccepted, a fear which is often validated by frequent public insensitivity on this issue. His story is evidently a positive one, and yet it saddens me to think that other children may be lacking the support which was so crucial to his own wellbeing.**

**In addition to the need for such children to be given the tools and the strength for their own self-acceptance, it is equally important for other children to learn respect and tolerance for such diversity of sexuality, identity and expression.**

**Bullying is a symptom which is far more likely to arise when such respect, tolerance, and support is lacking.**

**However, we know that the reality of bullying in itself is quite complex, with bullies themselves often also requiring support to address their own deeply rooted social and personal issues.**

**Moreover, a bully at school often turns out to be a bully at home, propagating domestic violence; and even at the place of work, where bullying and harassment are considered a health and safety issue.**

**Children may (and often do) use bullying as an outlet to express other problems which they have in their own lives, lacking a healthier medium with which to do so. In this respect, any attempts to address the issue of bullying should be developed with both the victim and the bully in mind.**

**I have seen fear in the eyes and faces of children who are bystanders to bullying, and who feel helpless in the situation.**

**This last observation is one of the many points which were raised by children in consultations which were put together by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, through the Child Forum and the National Institute of Childhood respectively.**

**Child participation is at the heart of today's conference, and indeed it is at the heart of much of the work which the Foundation undertakes. In order to meaningfully consider the issue of bullying, it was important for us to consider the topic from the perspective of the child.**

**What constitutes bullying? What do children expect adults to do about it? What responses do they consider helpful in dealing with bullying?**

**I will leave it to the children's video presentations in the afternoon to address this in further detail, and I similarly look forward to learning more from the children's consultations themselves, and from the experts who facilitated the discussion.**

**Today's event is enriched by a number of other thoughtful interventions, which include key note presentations delivered by international experts from Australia, Ireland, and Israel, and reflections from local professionals working with children.**

**I would like to thank them for being here today, and for the insights which they will be sharing with us during the event. We have all been brought together today through a shared commitment to address this violation of children's human rights.**

**We do so with the conviction that in order to do this well, we must listen to what children have to say, and learn from what children consider to be effective.**

**I hope that you will be inspired by the thoughts and observations which will be shared here today, and that you carry these with you in your professional experiences.**

**This is just the first step in our bid to ensure that children's wellbeing remains an issue on the national agenda.**



**The wellbeing of children is something which must go beyond academic discourse, and become tangibly translated into the everyday lives of our children.**

**We hope to rely on your support and participation in this venture, as we take our next steps along this journey in the months and years to come.**

**Thank you.**