

# An abuser behind almost every bully

Most face some form of torment at home, writes **Biënne Huisman**

**N**ADIVA Schraibman, who turns 40 in September, was bullied at school. For the duration of her primary school years at a private school in Linksfield, Johannesburg, she was humiliated by a classmate.

"He tormented me. He was just always after me, physically bullying me, standing on my heels, giving me wedgies (pulling up her underwear). He called me names in front of people," Schraibman said.

She addressed her painful early-school memories this year by creating a documentary called *Lunchbox Bullies*, which traces the roots of bullying at

Primary School in Alexandra, Johannesburg.

"It was a cathartic experience," she said. "*Lunchbox Bullies* gave me a sense of understanding that there are reasons for children to bully. Their temperaments play a role but, for the most, bullies are created by their environment."

Schraibman and co-director Nhlanihla Mthethwa spoke to the school's principal and pupils before identifying a group of pupils, aged between nine and 12, who were known to intimidate peers.

Viewers are taken on a harrowing journey into the lives of these young bullies as the camera follows them home, revealing neglect, beatings, hunger and abuse as factors that contribute to their aggressive behaviour.

The documentary points out how these children's rights to such basics as family care, nutrition, shelter and protection from neglect, abuse and degradation (as set out in Section 28 of South Africa's Bill of Rights)

## Anti-bullying tips for parents

- Obviously, a child's basic needs, such as love and nourishment, must be met.
- Keep communication lines open. A child who can communicate problems to parents and teachers is less vulnerable to bullies.
- Teach your child to use communication and not aggression to resolve conflict.
- Parents should serve as role models. Teach your child through example that conflict is

not necessarily bad and can be resolved through good communication.

- There is no place for corporal punishment or beatings when raising a child. "This gives a message to the child that it is okay to exert force and power."
- Prevent your child from being exposed to violence portrayed as the norm in media. For example, avoid TV programmes such as wrestling shows that glorify violence. — Alan Fisher of UCT

are not met, and how this shapes their actions. Ultimately, it aims to uncover a major source of violence in our society.

In a particularly poignant scene, 12-year-old [redacted] who has been chastised for stealing lunch boxes and beating a little girl, is filmed tearfully speaking of his never-ending hunger pangs. He says his mother beats him and spends her little cash — allegedly maintenance money from his father — on wine-drinking binges with her friends.

The filmmakers follow [redacted] home, where they speak to his grandmother, mother and aunt around a table in their two-room shack.

In the interview, the aunt and granny accuse [redacted]'s mother of being mean to him and not feeding him.

Said [redacted] "We learned that, at this school, a lunch box is a status symbol. It's not just about the food — a lunch box signifies that your parents love you. If you don't have one, it

means that you're not loved, which is obvious to everyone else. That was [redacted]'s biggest shame."

[redacted]'s plight so touched a viewer of the documentary on SABC last month that she offered to foster him and pay for him to attend another school. [redacted] will move in with his foster family in [redacted] near Brakpan for a test period this week.

Gwen Mashaba, a social worker at the Johannesburg-based Friends for Life organisation, which deals with Aids orphans and other vulnerable children, said: "It will improve his behaviour because he will be free and no longer feel scared and unloved. Children feel isolated and lonely and then become aggressive," she said.

Joan van Niekerk, manager of advocacy and training at Childline, said how parents and others deal with bullying "will determine how a child, both the victim and perpetrator, develop and perform at school. One must

not merely think of the victim but also of the perpetrator, who often needs help from some form of oppression. Bullying is a form of violence and should never be answered with violence."

Professor Alan Fisher, head of the division of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Cape Town, warned that bullying could become a self-perpetuating cycle.

"The victims of bullying frequently become bullies themselves. People often think that bully victims and perpetrators belong in separate groups. But often someone who is bullied by someone more powerful deals with his or her humiliation by bullying someone less powerful.

A study by Fisher and other researchers, published in the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* last year, found that one in four children in rural Western and Eastern Cape schools were affected by bullying.

In urban schools, cyber-bullying rules through mobile message network MXit, social networking website Facebook and posting videos on YouTube.

"Whenever there is a new medium of communication, there is the potential for exploitation and harm being done," said Van Niekerk.

● *Lunchbox Bullies* will be screened at the Encounters International Documentary Festival in Cape Town on July 10



TELL US: Do you have experience of bullying? What is the best way of dealing with it? Write to [telles@sundaytimes.co.za](mailto:telles@sundaytimes.co.za)



**HARROWING JOURNEY:** A new documentary gives viewers a glimpse into the lives of young bullies