Peer support takes big step to fight bullying

Kim Arlington

THE concept of peer support explains year six student Brandon Veledy’s to Arjuna Krishnan in kindergarten, is about “making the school a better place.”

All 356 students at Normanhurst Public School will join the peer support program, which year 6 pupils taught to mentor children from younger grades.

Teacher Linda Callanan said it promotes leadership and helps prevent bullying.

“When kids are empathetic and talk to other kids, it makes more likely that bullying behaviour will be uncovered and reduced,” she said.

“Just its part of a whole school approach which also includes developing self-confidence, acceptance and resilience in the children, encouraging them to speak out if they or someone they know is being treated unfairly, modelling respectful relationships. ”

The Normanhurst students are among 100,000 reached each year by Peer Support Australia.

“Sometimes the student who’s engaging in bullying does so because they have low peer acceptance, they have low self-esteem, they have low emotional intelligence,” the organisation’s national education manager, Sharlene Charles, said.

“If a student is actually dealing with how kids are relating with each other and making sure those relationships are positive, affirming, helpful and fun, then you’re going a long way to dealing with bullying,” she said.

Today’s National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence aims to give schools positive strategies to address bullying.

Con Stough, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at Swinburne University, has studied the relationship between bullying, adolescence, and emotional intelligence – the ability to perceive, assess and control your own and others’ emotions. People with low emotional intelligence tended to bully and be bullied more often, he said.

Early results from a pilot program to improve social and emotional intelligence, are encouraging, Professor Stough said.

“Attitudes the way we deal with bullying is basically after it’s happened, we need preventive interventions.”