

# BULLYING

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# Bullying

## Why is this issue important to children?

Bullying is a topical issue that has been vastly researched. Much government funding is devoted to implementing strategies that address the issue of bullying within schools. Schools themselves are now required by law to have policies to counter bullying.

The reason for such investment may be the alarmingly widespread nature of bullying:

- A spokes-person from the children's charity Childline says that bullying was the main concern of children who phoned the charity over the past two years. During this period they received nearly 20,000 phone calls<sup>1</sup>.

- A survey conducted by Whitney and Smith in 1993 suggests that bullying in schools may exist at a worryingly high level<sup>2</sup>. An anonymous self-report questionnaire was administered to 2600 pupils from 17 primary schools, and 4100 pupils from seven secondary schools in Sheffield. This was the most extensive survey to date. 27% of the primary-aged children reported being bullied "sometimes"; with 10% of that proportion being bullied "once a week" or more frequently. In secondary schools the number of pupils being bullied "sometimes" were 10%, with 4% of that number being bullied "once a week" or more frequently.

- A survey of 2308 pupils from 19 schools suggests a decrease in the numbers of children aged 10-14 being bullied, perhaps of a result of recent anti-bullying work done in schools<sup>2</sup>. In this survey the number of 10-14 year olds being bullied 'two or three times a month' or more was 12.2% and the number bullying others was 2.9%. This is lower than the number of victims of corresponding age in the survey by Whitney and Smith, which was 13.1%, and lower than the number of bullies which was 6.8%. However this is a tentative claim, and there is no evidence to suggest a similar decrease in rates of bullying among younger children.

## Who comprises the target population?

Identified in the literature are particular potential risk factors associated with those who comprise the target population. These include children:

- in remedial classes
- with special needs

- with fewer friendships
- who have physical disabilities
- experiencing family crises/distress/neglect
- from minority ethnic groups
- who are short
- children who are obese

### What are the main risk and protective factors?

#### - Risk factor: minority ethnic group

Racist behaviour falls within the definition of bullying, except that it can occur within a single, isolated event<sup>3</sup>. A questionnaire survey was administered to three ethnic minority groups, Hindu, Indian Muslim, and Pakistani. 224 children aged 12-15 completed questionnaires in Mosques, only 19 children completed them from schools. Fifty seven per cent of boys and forty three percent of girls reported being bullied during the school term. Each ethnic group were equally as likely to have been bullied by white children, but the most common perpetrators were other Asian children from another ethnic group.

Recently, researchers at Luton University conducted a survey of 34,000 pupils within 35 LEA's<sup>4</sup>. More than a third of the ethnic minority children included in this survey suffered racist abuse and race related name-calling at school or on their way home.

#### - Risk factor: disability or SEN

Literature has identified children who have a disability or special educational needs (SEN) as being particularly prone to encountering bullying. According to Nabusoka and Smith (1993) children who have a disability are 2-3 times more likely to be victims of bullying and are more likely themselves to bully others<sup>5</sup>. One study interviewed 186 children aged between 8 and 16<sup>6</sup>. Ninety-three of these were identified as having SEN, and were matched to a child without SEN. Children with SEN were more likely to be bullied than were the mainstream children with whom they were compared. This was directly related to their special educational needs, a higher proportion of children with moderate learning difficulties were victimised than children with mild learning difficulties, but this was also due to the fact that these children tended to have fewer friends. Moreover, another study found that bullying was the main reason disabled children moved from mainstream schools to special non-inclusive schooling<sup>7</sup>.

#### - Risk factor: being short

A bullying questionnaire was given to pupils who were below the third centile for height, and to controls matched for age and sex<sup>8</sup>. Claims of having been bullied were higher among short pupils than the controls. Short pupils also reported more social isolation, although a causal relationship between isolation and being bullied cannot be assumed

**- Risk factor: individual traits**

Risk factors at the individual level are outlined by Smith<sup>9</sup>. He states that children who have few friends are at an increased risk of being bullied. Characteristics that children possess may make them vulnerable to bullies. These include shyness and poor coping strategies, such as crying, which may lead to the victim being seen as weak. Often, bullied children come from over-protective families; this over-protectiveness may result in a lack of assertiveness and weak coping strategies further increasing their vulnerability.

**- Protective factor: developmental age**

Reports of being bullied decline with age, rates appear lower in secondary schools than primary schools. When interviewed, 71% of pupils appeared to believe that this was because as a child progresses through school, there becomes fewer children who may be in a position, in terms of strength, to bully them<sup>10</sup>. However, there is no increase in bullying from the oldest years of primary school to the youngest years of secondary school, which would be expected. Another explanation is that, with age, children may learn more effective ways of dealing with situations where bullying occurs. It may be that reports of bullying become less frequent because the child's definition of bullying alters throughout their childhood. The younger children were more likely to include fighting for example as bullying behaviour even though this does not include an imbalance of power.

**- Protective factor: friendships**

It appears as though having friendships protect children from being vulnerable to victimisation, which may provide support for initiatives such as "befriending". 158 pupils from 5 primary schools were asked to nominate peers who were victimised in four different ways, this was done at Time 1 and then 6 months later at Time 2<sup>11</sup>. Children who had a 'best-friend' at both Time 1 and Time 2 showed a decrease in 'Victim' scores, whereas children who did not have a best friend at either time showed an increase. Furthermore, a change over time in having or not having a 'best-friend' was associated with a change in victimisation. This suggested that the positive effects of a friendship remain even when that friendship has ended, and that a previous lack of friendship has a continued risk of victimisation even when a new friendship is developed.

<b>Where risk may be manifest</b>
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**- The playground:** A survey conducted in 1997 revealed that the most frequent place for the occurrence of bullying was the school playground; 65% of victims reported being bullied here<sup>2</sup>. In the Elton Committee of Enquiry into Discipline in Schools (DES 1989), lunchbreak was identified as the biggest behaviour related problem<sup>12</sup>. Aggressive behaviour during this period was the main reason for concern according to the teachers

and Headteachers in 13 LEA's in South East England. Peter Blatchford recognises that aggressive acts and bullying behaviour may occur during break-time in the playground; he points to research on the extent of teasing and name-calling. However, he argues that the positive aspects of break-time must not be forgotten. An example of the positive nature of breaktime is that it provides the opportunity for peer relations to develop, which have an impact on a child's social and cognitive development. Furthermore, conflict may be an important aspect of children learning to manage difficulties

**- Beyond the school gates:**

Although most bullying behaviours appear to occur in the school establishment, bullying must not be seen as purely a school-based phenomenon<sup>13</sup>. It can be argued that bullying is not born and bred in schools, but that acts of bullying within schools are merely mimicking acts of violence in the wider community. Thus an intervention directed towards a whole community may be better placed to reduce a predisposition towards violence in children, rather than one within schools. This was attempted in 1993 in Hull. The project worked not only with schools but also with statutory and voluntary agencies, and empowered members of the community to take action to stop bullying. Counselling was given to those whose lives were affected. Work was done with parents in order to provide better early social and educational development by way of a 'parenting pack' and numerous workshops. However no measurement as to the effects of the Project, or views of the service users or providers were collected.

**- Text messages:**

Mobile phone text messages are a recently accepted medium through which bullying may take place. Schools will receive revised anti-bullying guidelines in September 2002 acknowledging, for the first time, the existence of bullying via text messages. The children's charity NCH shows evidence that new "21<sup>st</sup> Century bullying techniques" may be emerging. Research produced by the charity on 15/5/02 demonstrated that 16% of children said they had received bullying or threatening text messages, 7% had been harassed in a chat room and 4% had been harassed via email<sup>14</sup>. Interventions must be sought that effectively tackle the emergence of these relatively new bullying techniques. Thus far none have been suggested in the literature.

**- Intra- and Extra-Familial bullying:**

A study was conducted in the U.S on bullying among siblings. It had been previously been shown that the social interaction styles demonstrated by bullies and victims differed as a result of parenting styles, and as such, may have been developed at home<sup>15</sup>. This study explored the possibility that interactions between siblings may also have a role to play in this social interaction style. Of 375 children, 30% reported being victimised frequently by their siblings, 8% often felt great fear of being seriously harmed. Children who were both bullies and victims of peer victimisation

were more likely to experience sibling victimisation. Again, this demonstrates that bullying cannot be seen as a phenomenon that exists only within the school arena. Thus in terms of interventions, the socialisation of children and relationships within the home should be tackled rather than the behavioural manifestations of this at school.

### What is the impact on victims?

The negative effects of bullying are pervasive in all areas of life, often impacting on physical or emotional health, schoolwork and peer relations.

#### Emotional and mental health:

- A meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies revealed that victimisation of children by their peers is strongly related to depression<sup>16</sup>. Across the studies it was noted that victims were subject to greater negative affect and thoughts about themselves than were their peers. This review suggests that children subjected to victimisation may suffer mostly from depression, suffer somewhat from loneliness, low global self-esteem and self-concept, and suffer to a lesser extent feelings of anxiety.

- A prospective study involving 2680 students was concerned with whether victimisation in year 8 led to anxiety or depression in year 9<sup>17</sup>. The measure was self-reports based on a clinical interview schedule. It was found that emotional disturbance in adolescence may be predicted by a history of victimisation and poor social relationships. Symptoms of depression were directly related to a history of victimisation in up to 30% of the students, after adjusting for confounding factors. This relationship was stronger for girls.

#### Health symptoms:

- 2962 children aged between 8-9 were asked a series of questions in the form of a semi-structured interview to examine the possibility of a relationship between bullying and common health problems<sup>18</sup>. Over twenty two per cent of these children reported bullying. This was not based on a standard definition, though an explanation was given if required. A linear relationship was found between reported levels of bullying and not sleeping well, bed wetting, feeling sad, experiencing more than occasional headaches and tummy-aches.

#### School experiences:

- A recent survey showed that being subjected to bullying could have consequences on children's attitude to school<sup>19</sup>. For boys, being bullied encouraged an anti-school approach; over 30% of bullied boys were 'anti-school' compared to 14% of non-bullied boys. However, both bullied girls and bullied boys were more likely than non-bullied girls and boys to say that 'worry about school or college work overwhelms me'. According to the authors of this survey, the DFEE states that a third of girls and a

quarter of boys are at some time afraid to go to school because of bullying.

### Which interventions work?

Bullying is most often manifest in the school arena, not surprising considering children spend a substantial part of their day there. Hence there has been considerable pressure put on schools to employ strategies which tackle the issue of bullying, and most anti-bullying interventions have been initiated in schools. Despite the vast array of suggestions to tackle bullying behaviour, there is a paucity of rigorous studies evaluating these interventions.

#### Whole School Approaches:

Due to media exposure, there has been an increased awareness of the issues surrounding bullying. In response, the government has now made it a legal requirement for schools in England and Wales to employ an anti-bullying strategy (as from September 1999). This calls for a whole school approach to tackle bullying, as can be seen in the DFES guidelines. This type of intervention has three distinct stages to deal with the manifestations and causes of bullying behaviour<sup>20</sup>. The first stage is a reactive one, crisis management. This can include approaches such as punishments, reasoning with the bullies, talking to the bully in a non-threatening manner and investigating incidents using a standardised procedure. The second stage is composed of intervention strategies. These are focused primarily on times and places where children are vulnerable. This may be when a child changes school mid-term or in particular areas identified as "bullying hotspots". The third stage is Prevention, a proactive component. Tattum states, "our experiences of working with different schools clearly shows that countering bullying is a wide ranging and multidimensional exercise", clearly advocating the benefits of the whole school approach.

A practical example of the Whole School approach was the DFE funded Sheffield Anti-Bullying Project<sup>21</sup>. The project worked with 16 primary schools and 7 secondary schools. Following the implementation of a Whole School Policy in these schools, there appeared to be a reduction in bullying behaviour. After 4 school terms, there was a reduction of children reporting being bullied in primary schools by 20%, and a reduction of children bullying others in primary and secondary schools by 14%. These figures must be taken with some caution however, as it is not clear as to how they were measured. Nevertheless, "(around 80%) of the pupils in schools felt that the bullying situation had improved"<sup>22</sup>. Schools that expended more time and effort witnessed more far-reaching results. There was a one-year follow up study, which further demonstrated that intervention in terms of bullying could work in the short term, though efforts need to be continually exerted. However, this study consisted of a small sample of schools. According to Carney and Merrell this project

lacks a robust evaluation or a continuous feedback element. Nevertheless, the project was fairly influential, leading to the development of the Government's anti-bullying campaign- Don't suffer in silence (1994, updated 2000).

#### Peer group programmes:

Peer group initiatives are a participatory response to the issue of bullying, whereby older students receive training in order to contribute to anti-bullying strategies such as mediation, mentoring, befriending and counselling. The aim is to create a more protective environment in schools and to increase peer intervention in situations where bullying occurs. Peer involvement in anti-bullying strategies appears logical when it is considered that bullying occurs within a social context. Indeed, Craig and Pepler (1997) observed that peers were present in 85% of bullying episodes that occurred on the school playground<sup>23</sup>. Later research employed naturalistic observation of a sample of children aged 5-12 to investigate peer responses to bullying behaviour. When peers were present during a bullying episode; 21% of the time they modelled they actively reinforced the bully by modelling their behaviour, 54% of the time they passively reinforced the bully by watching without joining in, and 25% of the time peers intervened to discourage the bully.

Evaluations of peer group programmes have not identified a reduction in actual bullying behaviour. A questionnaire survey was administered to 2313 secondary school pupils (including those from a year 7 tutor group, a year 9 tutor group and peer supporters) and 226 of their teachers from 51 schools, where a peer programme had been established and running for at least one year<sup>24</sup>. Although it appears that the peer programmes initiated in these schools did not facilitate a reduction in bullying, the teachers and staff nevertheless valued them. The most commonly reported benefits of a peer support system to the users were; providing people who listen, providing strength and showing that someone cares. In terms of the effects for the whole school, the most frequently cited benefits were; the school is "caring", bullying is reduced and teachers are free to do other things. However the service providers (teachers and peer supporters) were more likely to cite beneficial aspects of peer support systems than the potential service users (pupils in Year 7 and 9). Apparent problems were identified as the lack of users, the negative attitude of some teachers and pupils and the lack of involvement from males. Another study examined the outcomes of an anti-bullying policy intended to alter the peer subsystem into a more supportive environment. Peer attitudes and behaviour were measured. The research showed a fairly limited effect on attitudes and behaviour, there were smaller decreases in intervening for pupils and higher rates of seeking teacher's help. Slightly larger effects were found for secondary students suggesting that the suitability of this type of intervention may differ according to developmental characteristics. As such, it may be unrealistic to employ peer group programmes with primary aged children. Another factor limiting the potential success of peer group

strategies is that children may be unwilling to intervene for reasons of self-preservation.

### Which interventions look promising?

- Forum Theatre: It is argued that, "Forum Theatre, because of the dynamic involvement of the audience, becomes a tool of transformation by sharing strategies to move from oppression to liberation"<sup>25</sup>. The Employment Project and Developmental Community Arts Company looked at the use of Forum Theatre to tackle the issue of bullying in schools. A play was produced, but was "unfinished". The pupils were told that they would have to complete the necessary scenes, which involved solutions to the problem. Examples of solutions explored were violence against the protagonist, telling the teacher, talking with parents, forming an alliance with a sympathetic classmate and undermining the bully's power through the use of humour. The views of both the theatre group and teachers within the schools were sought, although this can by no means be considered a rigorous evaluation as it lacked the thoughts and ideas of the children involved. The theatre group believed that the strength of forum theatre lies in the ability to promote identification with the victim and allowing children to generate their own solutions to a problem. The teachers thought that such a use of forum theatre was beneficial directly in terms of the issue of bullying, and in the impact of the methodology.

- The support code: The support code is an example of a non-punitive anti-bullying intervention strategy developed by the Connections Project, a part of the work by the Family Service Unit<sup>26</sup>. The aim of this approach is to "develop an ethos and atmosphere of proactive mutual support", which should discourage bullying from thriving. The principle of inclusive group support is valued, and support groups promote this. Ideas for the support code are facilitated firstly through circle time, which is initiated in the classroom. The initial ideas are then developed through presentation, a code of behaviour in certain situations is finalised. Action statements are also included in the code, which are the written contractual-like aspects of the support code. In order for the continuation of the support code within the school, activities such as having a Goal for the Day or integrating the support code into the curriculum are being investigated. The limited number of questionnaires circulated regarding the effectiveness of the support code suggested that most pupils and teachers believed it was a worthwhile strategy if implemented across the whole school.

- Restorative justice: Improving harmed relationships are emphasised above attributing blame or punishments in this innovative method of addressing challenging or disruptive behaviour and conflict in schools<sup>27</sup>. Another example of a whole school approach, the whole school community is involved in resolving conflicts, by means of building and

developing relations. Examples of restorative justice have already been implemented in schools, such as peer mediation and circle time. An intervention beginning to be recognised and used is restorative conferencing, whereby outside facilitators are involved. Everyone has a chance to say how he or she has been affected by the incident, and suggest ways of improving things. This method has been employed in a few schools around the UK. Nottingham Education Authority and Nottingham Police have worked in partnership to offer conferences in schools for cases of bullying; so far, all parties involved have responded positively. In Devon a project is using Youth Affairs Officers to run conferences in six secondary schools. In order for the restorative justice approach to be effective, it requires the ethos and philosophy to be embedded within the schools. This approach takes a great deal of time to employ, and training to learn the necessary skills, although a training pack for teachers is currently being developed.

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<sup>1</sup> The Playground Blues. Community Care (14/01/1999)

<sup>2</sup> Smith, P. K., & Shu, S. (2000) What good schools can do about bullying. Findings from a survey in English schools after a decade of research and action. *Childhood* 7 (2): 193-212.

<sup>3</sup> Esla, M. & Mukhtar, K. (2000). Bullying and racism among Asian schoolchildren in Britain. *Educational Research*; 42 (2): 207-217

<sup>4</sup> Corporate author (19/08/02) Greater London Authority, Social Services Bulletin. D0203209.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, P. (2002) Schools, bullying and ways of preventing it. *Violence in Schools and Public Policies*. Editions scientifique et medicales Elsevier SAS.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, D., Whitney, I., & Smith, P. K. (1994) Bullying of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. *Support for Learning* 9 (3): 103-106

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/news/research/28/1.html>

<sup>8</sup> Voss, L. D., & Mulligan, J. (2000) Bullying in school: are short pupils at risk? Questionnaire study in a cohort. *British Medical Journal* 320: 612-613.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, P. K. (2000) Bullying and harassment in schools and the rights of children. *Children & Society* 14: 294-303.

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<sup>12</sup> Blatchford, P. (1998) The state of play in schools. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry Review* 3 (2): 58-67

<sup>13</sup> Randall, P. (1995) Beyond the school gates. *Special Children* 19-21.

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