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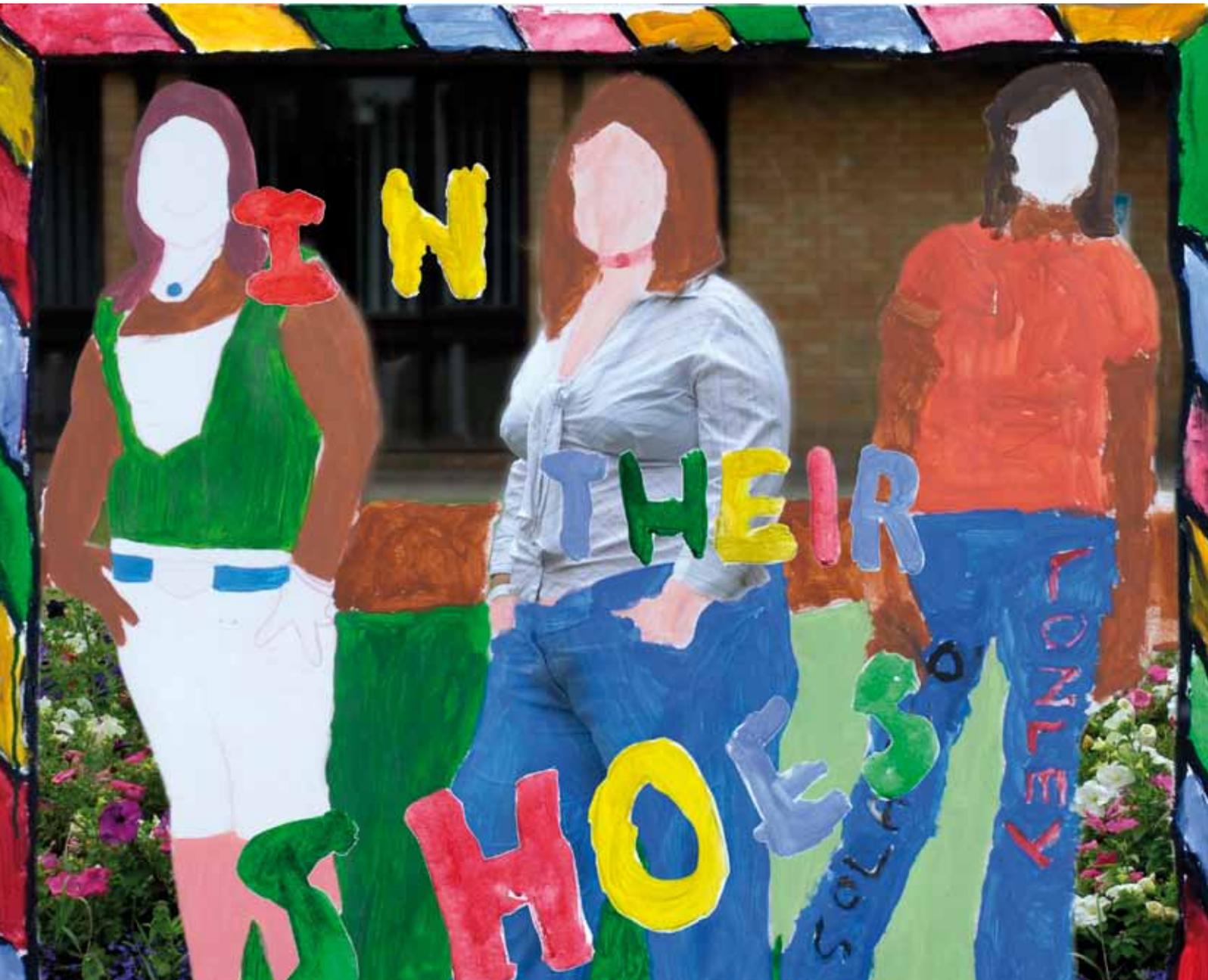


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The complexity of girls' social interactions and the impact of negative peer relationships

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Section one: Context and commissioners' requirements

Context

Since September 2009 Cardiff Against Bullying has received an increase in the number of referrals for one to one support and group work intervention. Increasingly, referrals are being made for young girls who have been affected by friendship disputes which escalate to bullying incidents. The problems experienced by young girls begin to appear in year 5, stemming from incidents that occur in years 3 and 4. Left unchallenged these issues follow young girls from primary school into secondary school, with an escalation of incidences in year 10. In a minority of such cases physical injury has been caused to victims resulting from externalised violence, where gangs of girls target one individual, or internalised harm where a young girl becomes depressed, withdrawn and isolated which in turn may lead to an individual resorting to self-harm.

In addition to increased referrals to Cardiff Against Bullying for one to one support and group work intervention, there has been an increase in the number of professionals contacting the service for advice on issues arising from friendship disputes with groups of young girls from as young as year 3.

Commissioners' requirements

The research was commissioned by Cardiff Children and Young People's Partnership (IFANC) in response to the above. The commissioners wanted to:

- understand more about negative peer relationships among girls and instances when these led to bullying
- look for improved solutions to girls' bullying
- examine how bullying impacted on girls' aspirations and career choices

Section two: Research aims and questions

The research aimed to identify the issues facing young girls involved in friendship disputes and the negative impact this has on their emotional and mental health. The primary aims were to:

1. Identify the issues that affect friendship groups and determine the extent of the problem facing young girls.
2. Identify the needs of young girls who experience these issues and identify services/programmes that can be implemented to raise self-esteem and aspiration in young girls.

The specific research questions we set out to examine were:

- What surface issues and actions trigger bullying behaviour?
- What aspects of each character's personal history might create a backdrop for them becoming involved in imbalanced power relationships with their peers?
- How do girls' peer relationship patterns lead to bullying situations?
- What part do boys play in girls' peer interactions?
- Do boys' relationships follow different patterns to those of girls?
- What strategies might be employed to sort out, avoid or contain peer relationships which have a bullying component?

Section three:

Research methods and approach

The research adopted a qualitative approach, focussing on gathering in-depth data from targeted groups and individuals. The techniques used were semi-structured interviews, participatory focus groups and observation. The time and funding limits of the research necessitated that we choose specific groups of girls to work with. The groups targeted were vulnerable girls using support services, and girls in secondary schools in Cardiff who had experience of bullying.

Rachel Beddoe, Cardiff Anti Bullying Strategy Co-ordinator, identified organisations and schools to take part in the research. Barnardo's Cymru staff worked with link practitioners in Fairbridge, Willows High School and Fitzalan Youth Club to identify groups of girls who could be invited to take part in the research. These groups were required to include, but not be exclusively made up of, girls who had experiences of bullying. We worked with girls aged between 13 and 17.

Ethics

Barnardo's Cymru has a detailed statement of ethical practice that is followed with every research project undertaken. A copy of this is available on request.

We established informed consent at the start of each focus group, and we prepared additional informed consent forms for the participants who were interviewed. The informed consent forms for both focus groups and interviews were written in very straightforward language and were in two halves. One half

comprised information for the young person detailing the purpose of the research, why we were seeking their opinions and experiences, anonymity, confidentiality and child protection procedures. The information half of the consent form included the researchers' names and contact details so participants could contact researchers at any time. The second half of the consent form was completed by each girl, and asked for name, age and school or project where they were meeting us. On this second side there was a statement that each girl signed, detailing that they were willing to talk with us and knew the ethical procedures of the research and the reasons for the research. We agreed child protection procedures in advance with the organisations who were hosting the research, so that if a disclosure arose all parties were aware of the processes to be undertaken.

We set boundaries in the focus groups to ensure that the girls were aware of what information they were willing to share in a group. We made provision for any instances whereby girls wanted to talk to us individually rather than in a group. At the start of the second focus group we reminded all participants of informed consent to participate.

We did not take contact details, but let the girls know that we would be tape recording what they said and storing transcripts on our computers for the duration of the research. Under data protection law we let them know that they could see the transcripts at any point.

We advised the girls that they could withdraw from the project at any point. We used participative exercises during focus groups and ensured that girls could choose not to participate in certain activities. When highly personal or sensitive issues arose, we signposted and referred on where necessary. This did not interfere with research processes and is an important way in which adult researchers can show their ethical responsibility to vulnerable participants. However, the researchers did not cross the boundaries of signposting and had clear boundaries to ensure they did not give information or support which they are not qualified to do.

All the girls were over 13 years old and had consented themselves to take part and so full parental consent was not sought. However, we did provide parental or guardian information leaflets about the research and opt out forms for parents and carers. The information leaflets included researcher contact details and invited parents to discuss the research or any queries they may have. The opt out forms enabled parents to withdraw their child from the research if they felt it was not something they should be involved with.

The research cohort

The commissioners requested that we engage with vulnerable girls who had experienced, or were experiencing, bullying. They were interested in understanding more about the underlying issues and social processes that lead to bullying between girls of secondary school age. They were also identified in the impact of bullying on the life trajectories of particular groups such as teenage mothers and young girls 'not in education or

employment' (NEET). Whilst we did not work specifically with a group of girls who were in the 'NEET' category, we did ensure that they were represented within the focus groups we facilitated. However, we did not have representation from, or engagement with, any teenage mothers.

We spoke to 29 girls, aged between 13 and 17, in three different research locations. One location was a secondary school, where we facilitated consecutive groups with 13 girls. These girls were from different year groups and were chosen to participate because they had had experience of bullying within the school. In the second research location, a voluntary sector organisation providing an alternative curriculum, we worked with 5 girls in two focus groups. Lastly, we worked with 11 girls in a youth club setting, situated in a socially and culturally diverse community. In this research location ensuring continuity of participants was difficult. We facilitated the first focus group with 5 girls on the expectation that they would be returning the following week. However, the follow up session couldn't go ahead, so instead we worked with a different group of 6 girls who wanted to be involved. We therefore chose to undertake the semi structured interviews with them, as we would only see them once.

Seven of the girls were Muslim, from different ethnic minority communities. There were no other minority ethnic communities represented, no other faith groups and no known statements of special educational needs held. The size of this study meant that we were unable to specifically focus upon girls' negative peer relationships and how this inter-relates with diversity and identities.

Research methods

We triangulated methods, using focus groups, interviews, non participant observation and secondary data.

We used a combination of discursive and creative methods to facilitate the focus groups, designing them to address the research questions within our ethical framework.

We decided to work with 3 different groups and run 2 consecutive sessions with each group, thereby facilitating 6 focus groups in total. We actually facilitated 5 focus groups for the reasons outlined above in relation to research cohort, but supplemented this with individual interviews. The aim of having two consecutive focus group sessions was to give the girls the opportunity to get to know us and be fully informed of the research purpose, methods and process, to become familiar with the questions we had about bullying, and to allow for some thinking time and individual reflection, before coming to the second session, no more than a week later. In this way, we were able to gather more in-depth data and ensure that informed consent could be implemented properly.

The focus groups in the school and the voluntary organisation were held within a week of each other, as planned. It was only possible to arrange the youth club work over a two week period, which impacted upon research continuity, as outlined above.

In the first focus group session we presented the girls with case studies of bullying situations and asked for their views on:

- What the triggers were to the bullying incidents?
- What they saw as the background issues leading to bullying?
- How girls' peer relationship patterns can lead to bullying situations?
- How could girls be helped or supported to avoid bullying situations?

Two workers ran these groups, one facilitated the discussion and the other recorded the material that came out of the discussion.

In the second focus group we used an art activity, with accompanying interview questions, to unpack what the peer interactions looked like in further detail. The girls were asked to make an artistic image of a typical bully, a typical victim and a typical girl who might be part of a group of bullies. We encouraged the girls to think about:

- What aspects of each character's personal history might create a backdrop for them becoming involved in imbalanced power relationships with their peers?
- What surface issues and actions trigger bullying behaviour?
- What part do boys play in girls' peer interactions and do boys' relationships follow different patterns to those of girls?
- What strategies might be employed to sort out, avoid or contain peer relationships which have a bullying component?

One researcher facilitated the group whilst the second recorded the data. The artistic images were used as data also.

The girls in the groups were asked to volunteer to be interviewed individually on a separate occasion. Of the girls who volunteered we selected girls for interviews based on their experience and understanding of bullying and how this could best inform the research aims. These semi structured interviews gave us an opportunity to explore the themes arising from the focus groups in more detail and with the confidentiality afforded by being in a one to one setting. Being semi structured enabled us to have set themes that we wanted to explore but to be flexible, allowing for the girl being interviewed to say as much as she wanted and include her own topics. In addition we were able to ask the girls some questions about what they thought the personal impact of being caught in a bullying relationship had on those involved. We conducted in-depth interviews with 9 girls including 3 from the school and 6 from the youth club: these were either recorded and transcribed, or notes were made, according to the preference of the interviewee.

Both the focus groups and the semi structured interviews were analysed manually, using latent content analysis.

We used secondary data from the Cardiff Against Bullying database which yielded information about numbers of referrals and reasons for referral to their service. We cross referenced this with the qualitative data to build up a fuller picture of the

background issues and presenting problems of gender and bullying and the complexities of girls' peer group dynamics.

We used non participant observation to record researcher observations and to ensure that conversations which were not directly related to questions in the focus groups were captured. These observation notes were of peer dynamics, notable moments and possible emerging themes and were used in analysis where themes required some clarity or where account needed to be made with regards to researcher reflexivity.

Section four: Research findings

We found seven main themes to the research findings. These are the triggers to bullying; the impact of personal and family background; girls' peer relationship patterns that lead to bullying; the use of virtual social networks in girls' bullying patterns; gendered peer relationships and bullying patterns; the personal consequences of girls' bullying; and the girls' suggestions for preventing and stopping bullying. Each of these is detailed and explored in turn below. The quotes are used to explain common issues that arose in the fieldwork. They have been chosen to highlight shared experiences and opinions.

A. Triggers to bullying

1. The impact of being perceived as 'different'

It was clear from all the focus group material that girls need to be very aware of the way they present, both visually and emotionally, to their peers if they are to avoid falling victim to bullying or social exclusion, as one girl's comments exemplify:

'People get bullied for being different.'

Girls with unfashionable, cheap clothing and accessories were likely to be at risk:

'They bully people who are wearing the wrong clothes like if you buy your clothes from Tesco you get the piss taken out of you.'

Those who had an aspect of their physical appearance which set them apart, such as a physical impairment, a lack of personal care and grooming, or ill health, could draw the bully's attention. For example, in one focus group session the 'bullied' character was portrayed as having 'a mono-brow, spots, a runny nose and a brace on her teeth'. Showing emotional or intellectual weakness can also prove to be a risk factor. Additional comments from the girls on their work included that this would be the kind of girl who would 'broadcast her insecurities'.

Any aspect of a girl's presentation that could be interpreted as a vulnerability might be a risk factor for bullying.

2. The effect of being new to a group or school

Bullying could also be triggered by being new to a group or school. A new person might be vulnerable to being bullied, or a new person might deal with the situation of being new by bullying:

'It's like if there is a new girl at school who is quiet, if she doesn't answer questions the right way- it's like she has an attitude - she has a problem. We would think she was giving attitude.'

The above comment implies that new girls who are 'quiet' can draw the attention of bullies, maybe because they present as vulnerable, or possibly because quiet people give little information away about themselves.

This leaves a space for others to wonder or worry about what their views and thoughts really are. Are they the same or different? Will they fit in or challenge the group culture? Will they challenge the bully? There is a desire to ask questions in order to illicit information about who this person is, and, more to the point, will she 'fit in' with the culture of the group. The term 'attitude' suggests a challenging response, maybe alluding to the risk presented if the new person is an even bigger bully than the ones operating in that particular community of girls, as referred to below:

'Some girls bullied my cousin out of the school. I spoke to the bully, she's big built, she'd bullied a lot of people here. The bully was new to the school.'

B. What aspects of personal and family background create a backdrop for imbalanced power relationships?

1. The links between poverty and bullying

Groups highlighted that educational and economic poverty in a girl's home background could impact negatively on her capacity to present as both visually and emotionally strong. Material poverty means that some families are less able to afford to dress their children in good quality clothing, or the designer labels that are deemed fashionable. Moreover, there was an awareness amongst girls that some individuals come from homes where they do not have the educational and

social guidance and support that other young people have, and that this can mean they lag behind with school work, or are not as familiar with social mores and how to 'fit in'.

This lack of self-awareness and limited social skills was illustrated via the artistic images of victims of bullying. One group prepared an image of a victim highlighting lack of self-awareness with the label; 'Why do they bully me? I am good looking ain't I?'

Another label pointed at a victim's awareness of difference, but lack of understanding that there would be a link between this and being bullied: 'I know I dress strange but still'. A suggestion was made in one group that these girls might benefit from some social skills training to help protect them from being so exposed to bullying.

2. Girls' perceptions of a bully's home and social background

The bullies were also viewed as having social and emotional weaknesses. When the girls got past their anger at bullying behaviour and were able to be more thoughtful about why a person might start to bully others, they frequently concluded that this would happen because the bully was miserable, unhappy or deprived in some way:

'I think there is something missing from the background of the group leader who is bullying.'

'The bully may have problems at home and bring them into work.'

'They are looking for attention so as not to be grieving or they may be pushed around at home.'

These individuals are viewed as being emotionally burdened, or emotionally deprived in some way and are perceived as attempting to find resolution to, or find relief from their own pain through their relationships at school. This might manifest in bullying behaviour in an effort to draw attention to themselves, or by exporting the pain into the victim and gaining for themselves, an albeit temporary, respite via feeling in control or triumphant. These comments illustrate that where there is no recognition of the emotional burdens these children and young people carry, or any space for them to express themselves and get some comfort and support within the school environment, or elsewhere, then there is a risk of bullying behaviour starting.

One of the groups portrayed the bully, in focus group 2, as having clouds around her head. When questioned about this, they said that this represented the fact that the bully is not happy and is quite depressed. The bully's feelings, and how they can be provoked also have implications for bullying, for example a girl inadvertently provoking feelings of jealousy in another was cited as a potential trigger for bullying.

The other perception of the link between home, or family background, and peer relationships was that bullying was simply learnt behaviour, and that bullies bring patterns of relating to their peers from their experience of being brought up in homes where family members bully each other:

'Bullies must learn about hitting people from their parents. They probably have a bad background.'

'It starts with how you are brought up and lifestyle.'

There was also the perception that there is a viral element to bullying behaviour, with the capacity for bullying behaviour to spread easily if it is not stopped by an external prohibition. This is evidenced by some girls describing becoming bullies following an experience of having been bullied themselves:

'To be a bully you need to be bullied first.'

'They look at a person and look for a target until you get in with them and end up a bully.'

'After I got bullied I took my anger out on the wrong people, I bullied.'

These girls are describing two ways in which this behaviour can spread. The first is when a girl must emulate bullying behaviour in order to be accepted into a group. The second describes a situation where the strong feelings of fury and humiliation stirred up in some victims of bullying are personally uncontainable and intolerable. They can only be assuaged by being 'passed on' to another person. The options here are to be a bully or a victim, for those who cannot tolerate the pain of being a victim the only option is to become a bully.

C. How girls' peer relationship patterns lead to bullying situations

1. How targets and social dynamics of bullying emerge

The girls described the process that takes place which leads to bullying as one which involves the harnessing of the power of the group to target, or hound, one, or a few, individuals. Firstly, the grain of weakness in the potential victim, or victims, emerges. That which will make them a target comes to light, either through deliberate provocation, or otherwise:

'Sometimes someone intends something as a joke, but others take it to heart. Sometimes someone will say something hurtful intentionally to hurt another person. It goes on usually because the person who takes offence is less resilient or less confident. Sometimes the comments made are too personal or about your family and that's why someone may take offence. Sometimes the comments and stuff just go on for too long, they are relentless and that way it's bullying.'

The bullying starts and the situation evolves, like a social virus, with the majority of the group either distancing themselves from, or actively joining in the attacks on the victim:

'The comments and gossip sometimes start with one person and spreads to other friends.'

The group is sometimes openly instructed by the ringleader to target a victim:

'Sometimes the ringleader instructs others to start bitching or spread rumours. There's always a ringleader in these situations.'

'The bully takes all their friends away and they tell people not to hang out with that person because they are being bullied and it's not cool to hang out with them.'

The power of the aggressive, bullying group affects all who are involved in it. Whilst the bully and the bully's victim take up the polarized positions of the aggressor and the persecuted, if there is no external means by which this destructive relationship can be tackled or mediated, then the implication for the peer group is one where each girl then has to make some compromise to the bullying culture. The stress of being involved in a group dynamic which seems to be beyond the reach of social rules and boundaries, which can afford young people some sense of safety, means that girls are left to weave their way through an emotional and social minefield, forcing them to compromise their values and expose themselves to risk.

Earlier I have referred to the way that bullying behaviour can spread from one person to another, which can quickly create a culture, within a peer group, dominated by very hierarchical and aggressive relationships. It is very difficult for an individual girl to avoid being drawn into the bullying culture, unless there is a group which operates an alternative culture available to her within the school or local community where she lives and learns. Where a girl is faced with no alternative, the data we gathered in our research described two ways of responding. The first involved

colluding passively with the culture of the group, the second described a more assertive challenging style, which also potentially resulted in being accepted by the group.

2. Girls' feelings about colluding with bullying

The girls who passively collude with the bullying group are those who distance themselves from the victim for fear of being excluded or alienated from the main body of the group:

'They do it (join in with bullying groups) because they are afraid of the outcome, afraid of being bullied.'

'They would probably be afraid that they would get targeted by the bully and there would be a lot of peer pressure.'

'You worry about being on your own and stoop to it (bullying) to not be on your own.'

One of the groups made an artistic image of a person who was involved in a group of bullies showing her as being fashionable and attractive, deliberately illustrated as a defence tactic. She exhibited signs of anxiety, had bitten nails and a cigarette in her hand, she had an image of a broken heart on her chest. The girls described her as being anxious about the bullying. Labels describing the girl's thoughts and feelings included:

'they might bully me'

'I might be her (the victim)'

'worried'

'upset'

'stressed'

'scared'

'I'll become unpopular'

'Everybody else is doing it'

'If I leave will I have friends?'

'I don't want this'

Once within the ranks of the bullying peer group, because of the volatility of the relationships and group dynamics, girls still cannot rest for fear of being pushed back out of the group. Girls can feel that they are treading a thin line in these groups, where unpredictable, emotionally charged interactions, can mean a falling out with one person resulting in a girl losing many friends:

'I was on the edge of the crowd. I could be in the middle one day and the next a "dead person walking".'

'When girls fall out with each other they may lose some of their friends.'

The risk, or fear, of ending up on one's own, and the perceived pressure from the group to become like them means that girls change their behaviour in ways which they often don't feel comfortable with. The comments associated with the image of the girls involved in a group of bullies, described earlier, illustrate the difficulty of this:

'I don't want this'

stressed'

'worried'

'upset'.

The pay off is a degree of relief as expressed here:

'It's easier being nasty than nice. It means you don't have to look over your shoulder.'

The above comment starkly describes the difficulty of maintaining a personal sense of morally sound, 'good' behaviour in relationships when one is outnumbered by peers who have bought in to a different way of operating. One way of making negative behaviour feel more acceptable, and distancing oneself from taking personal responsibility for it, is by persuading, or forcing, others to behave badly also, so that it becomes 'the norm'. However, in some cases, becoming part of such a group can lead to high risk behaviour, and the incumbent can feel, and is, in fact, trapped without external help or support:

'I started doing things I didn't want to do. They got me on drugs, sleeping with boys, they'd phone me up (abusive calls) and knock on my door.'

The girl quoted above is describing a very extreme case of bullying which extended across areas of her life from school into the community. Her peer group was a particularly volatile and emotionally charged one where a number of the young people were dealing with significant family trauma and stress. In the absence of any effective intervention these teenagers visited some very unpleasant behaviour upon each other. This resulted in individuals self-harming and attempting suicide.

3. Retaliating to bullying

The second response option is to fight back with the aim of standing up to the bully. The aim of this is to avoid becoming the victim of bullying; however, this strategy comes with its own risks. Taking on a bully, and showing strength can lead to some girls accepting the challenger into their group; however, they may be more interested in using the challenger, rather than befriending them, as illustrated below:

'Sometimes when you fight back they realise that you will stick up for yourself, then some girls who have previously been bullying you will then pretend to be your friend. They then get you to fight their battles and then when you get caught you get labelled as a bully. Sometimes the original bully starts to bully you again.'

There are two issues being flagged up here, firstly where disputes and differences are resolved by utilizing a range of aggressive or negative methods, then girls may find themselves trapped within a volatile culture of relationships, characterised by cycles of arguments and disputes. Secondly the 'labelling' the girl is referring to here is being carried out by adults, within a school situation or otherwise. This means that where there are no formal, organisational routes available for addressing bullying, the girl may be forced to stand up for herself and, ironically, ends up being branded a bully in her attempts to stop the bullying.

For both the girls who collude with bullying and those who fight their way into an aggressive group culture, because they have no other choice, there is an emotional price to pay. This is the loss of the opportunity for more ordinary, benign friendships, and a sense of belonging. The following are the words of a young person who was clearly reaching for this experience:

'I think there does come a point when you get bullied that you get really fed up with the bullying and turn around and stand up for yourself. That's usually when the fighting comes in. But fighting doesn't solve anything it just shows that you can throw your fists around. It may resolve issues which are smaller, but it doesn't resolve the bigger issues.'

The desire to be an accepted part of a peer group, to find one's place and belong is fundamentally what is being sought after here. However, the aggressive, volatile pattern of relationships, that many young people have to operate within, are limited in their capacity to provide the quality of belonging which can support healthy emotional and social functioning.

D. The use of virtual social networks in girls' bullying

1. The complexities, subtleties and pervasiveness of virtual communication

The girls across the groups spoke about how social media can serve to trigger bullying, but more frequently serve to inflate and expand the impact of negative group behaviour.

Firstly, it's important to note that the girls were aware that media communications are a complex two way street where meanings and interpretations of messages can be coloured by the states of mind of those that receive them:

'There are different tones when you send a text and it can be how the person receives things which are also important.'

'You've got to make exceptions and try to imagine what they mean when it's in writing.'

There was evidence from one group that girls were trying to build extra communications into their messaging in order to communicate more effectively. However, the complexity of this can sometimes lead to heightened sensitivity, or risk of giving offence as illustrated by the following girl's description:

'It does cause problems if there are not enough kisses at the bottom of the message, people get offended. It also depends if you put LOL or OK at the bottom of your message. If you put LOL with a full stop, or K with a full stop people can take offence 'cause it shows you've got attitude. Back in the day LOL used to mean 'laugh out loud' – now there are new ones so people get offended if you put a full stop after the word or not. They think you've got an attitude if you do. If you put 'K' instead of 'OK' that's offensive, but it's better to put 'Okay.'

Another girl reported:

‘...on Facebook it matters how you sign off your messages. If you use a sentence with a full stop it can be offensive, for example, if you sign off your message ‘K..’ that is really offensive, you have to make sure you put kisses at the bottom of your message and after everything.’

It seems that these girls are trying to create a code which adds nuance to their messages so that their meaning can be better communicated. However, the code also seems quite complex and burdensome, making communicating via the written word a tricky business. One can imagine a girl new to the group entering a messaging network fraught with potential for wrong footing.

Being part of this virtual social realm is not optional, the girls we spoke to felt that they had to be on Facebook:

‘It’s not an option not to be on Facebook at our age. You can’t make friends without Facebook, you would be seen as weird if you don’t have Facebook.’

For these girls, social networks are becoming the main means of keeping in touch with each other:

‘I never ring anyone.’

‘I don’t like talking on the phone, my voice is weird.’

‘Yeah it’s like after football it’s ‘in-box me’, we don’t say ‘phone me’ anymore.’

Some of the comments made illustrate how social media can serve to inflate or extend disagreements and how

intimidating it can feel when a face to face disagreement moves into virtual group environments such as Facebook:

‘If I argue I expect it to be between me and the other person. If it goes out to others and I don’t know who they are, like when they put it on Facebook, it’s then worldwide. Everyone knows your name.’

‘That’s a really big problem (cyber-bullying)... People post abusive stuff or make up rumours and put it on someone’s Facebook page because they want to spread it to as many people as possible. They want the whole world to know. That’s when other people join in and get involved and take sides. It goes on from there.’

Moreover, once the argument has moved into the Facebook realm, girls felt much less able to contain the ‘rumour-mill’ or even to protect themselves against any further interaction with the attacking person:

‘What I hate about Facebook is that if the person you’ve had an argument with tried to add you as a friend, you don’t have to accept but they can still message you. They can bypass the system of you having to accept them as a friend because they can still contact you.’

This girl is not aware of the privacy settings on Facebook that can stop this situation. This suggests that despite the central part Facebook plays in these girls’ social lives, they aren’t always as clear about how it works as they could be, and therefore not in the strongest position to protect themselves.

E. Are girls' and boys' negative peer relationships different and what part do boys play in girls' peer relationships?

1. Girls' perceptions of gendered bullying patterns

All three groups expressed the view that there was a difference between the way boys and girls resolve arguments. A feature of this was the perception that boys don't get as involved in disputes as girls, or that disputes between boys tend to be resolved quickly with a fight:

'Boys don't make a big deal out of arguments, they just have a fight and the next day they are friends again. They are not as stubborn as girls.'

'Boys will forget, girls remember things and bring them up during an argument and things get worse.'

Boys were viewed as expressing themselves physically whilst girls were more cerebral, using 'cleverness' and 'manipulation' to bully:

'Boys tend to be physically strong but girl bullies are sometimes quite clever, they know how to manipulate situations more than boys.'

'Girls tend to speak behind each other's backs, sometimes they say things to your face and give dirty looks. Boys tend to argue and come face to face. They will have a fight or just walk away but in a week or so they are friends

again. It doesn't happen like that with girls. Girls hold it against each other, girls' arguments last longer than boys' arguments.'

'Boys are more forgiving, when they argue it only lasts a few days. They shake hands and the argument is over, girls' arguments go on much longer... Girls tend to spread gossip and make up big rumours. Boys do make up rumours but they are smaller than girls' rumours. Boys don't tend to take sides in an argument, when girls fall out with each other they may lose some of their friends.'

The above also suggests that boys don't employ psychological game playing and emotional cruelty to the same degree that girls are capable of. Bullying techniques described as being used by girls include, rumour spreading, creating gangs and sowing social disharmony and using Facebook and other social media to spread abuse further.

There was also a perception that girls tended to use virtual media in a more manipulative and damaging way than boys:

'Girls put stuff on Facebook, they tend to bitch on Facebook, when girls argue it goes on for weeks.'

'Girls are clever with the things they put on Facebook.'

It seems from the above comments and observations made by the girls in our sample that there is an emotional intensity in girls' relationships which is different from that present in relationships between boys. Boys are viewed as using short bursts of physical fighting to resolve

disagreements which act as a safety valve, releasing the emotions fiercely and swiftly and returning their relationships to some equilibrium. Girls are viewed as having long-running battles in which more psychological attack is brought into play.

2. The intensity of girls' friendships

Girls identified the positive aspects to girls' relationships, when they were working well as including quite high levels of trust and personal sharing:

'They share secrets that you can't share with your parents. Talk about who you fancy. Hanging around with someone you trust. Boys might not share secrets so much.'

It may be that girls make use of their close intimate friendships to share very personal, emotional material which makes the breakdown of friendships more high risk. They risk being more emotionally exposed and easily hurt, by the betrayal of a close friend. Facebook and other social networking sites make this even more high risk by creating opportunities for placing highly personal information or comments within a 'world-wide' forum.

3. How boys encourage girls' disagreements and fights

Some of the girls mentioned the interest that some boys take in the disagreements that go on between girls, sometimes stirring up the tension for their own entertainment:

'Boys like to see girls fight, they like to see girls 'bitch fight'. Some girls like to fight in front of the boys, they think it impresses them.'

'We were arguing during homework club, the boys were on her side. I walked out and my cousin and friend came with me. All the boys followed her, she said she wanted a fight. The boys like to see girls fighting, they call it 'bitch fighting'... the boys were following on bikes, I ended up fighting this girl.'

'Boys tend to encourage the fighting. Some girls go along with what the boys want. They usually go along with boys they fancy, they try to impress them and be popular with them.'

The above comments suggest that the point at which girls' disputes escalate into physical fights is the point at which they become of particular interest to the boys. There is an element of girls playing up to the boys' desire to see a fight, and that there may be a sexual element to this, as described above, with girls trying to use fighting to impress a boy they find attractive.

F. Girls' thoughts on the personal consequences of bullying

1. The affect of bullying on confidence and self esteem

Being bullied was thought to have profound short and long term consequences, including a dip in confidence and self-esteem and a desire to avoid a repeat of the experience at all cost:

'Bullying really affects your confidence, your confidence goes, if you are bullied it really affects your self-esteem.'

'Bullying' does affect your confidence. People tend to behave differently when they are getting bullied. They tend to keep their heads down and be quiet all the time and you know something is up. They start to keep themselves to themselves more, you notice a change.'

'If you have fallen out with friends you don't tend to go to the same places as before because you know they will be there. You tend to stay in and avoid them, it affects where you can go.'

'I think it affects where you go because you would avoid the places where you know the bully hangs out with their friends. I do think it affects...relationships. It might affect the way you are with other people because you don't want it to happen again with these other people. It might affect the way you behave, it might make you less confident with new friends.'

As a natural follow on from this it was felt that avoiding contact with the bully would also influence subject choice, and activities at school and elsewhere:

'The choices you make at school tend to be to avoid being in the same lessons as the real bullies. So you choose the subjects you take on that basis not because you really want to do those subjects. You tend not to go out so don't do stuff after school.'

'You would avoid the subject that the bully was taking, for example, if the bully was taking sports, even if you wanted to do sports you'd make your choice based on avoiding the bully, so wouldn't opt to do sports.'

'Girls are more likely to avoid lessons to avoid the bully.'

So, from what we can gather from the views of these girls, being bullied can influence the way their social, educational and career choices are made. In this respect the dominance of a bullying culture in institutions and services used by children can actively limit their choice and undermine their healthy development.

G. Girls' ideas on how bullying can be prevented or stopped

1. The perceived need to stand up for yourself

When asked how they would address bullying problems in individual relationships, a strong message about the need to fight back and show oneself to be stronger than the bully, was consistent across all data sets:

'The people who get bullied don't stick up for themselves. They need to stick up for themselves against the bully.'

'But you have to stand up for yourself against bullies. You have to stand up to them.'

These girls are talking about holding on to a sense of personal pride and a preparedness to withstand, or refuse to accept, being mistreated. This may be enough to bring the mistreatment to an end. However it may escalate to violence, and so is a strategy not without its risks:

'For me the bullying stopped as soon as I fought them.'

'You have your pride, they normally leave you alone after fighting. You are not going to let them hit you.'

'You have to stick up for yourself and show them who's hardest.'

One girl described arriving at a new school and finding her place in the group thus:

'When I was new to the school, during my first week I had to fight. I had a falling out with a girl. I was walking home and somebody pulled my hair from behind, I turned round and punched her, but I punched the wrong girl, not the one who'd pulled my hair but the girl next to her. I punched her in the face.'

This girl felt strongly that she couldn't allow any provocation to pass, she had to show her 'strength' by hitting out. She stated that 'you get in through fighting'.

This reflects a strong belief amongst all the girls we spoke to that fighting back, or showing physical and emotional 'strength' and a preparedness to stand up for oneself and fight, is often the only way to avoid being bullied. As described earlier, this may lead to becoming more accepted by the dominant group, and evading being the victim in the short term. However, this doesn't mean that the girl escapes the bullying culture of the group, which throws up other problems described in section 4(1).

There was evidence that for girls, problems need to be tackled early on as they become more entrenched and difficult to deal with as time goes by:

'When teachers try to stop bullying it really does depend on how long the arguments have been going on for. If it's only a short time it can work but if it's been going on for much longer then it doesn't tend to resolve anything. Sometimes the person who has told the teacher gets labelled a 'grass'. But if it's a recent argument there is a better chance of sorting it out this way.'

There was also the suggestion that there was a lack of determination amongst adults in getting to the root cause of bullying which is more established:

'I went up to a teacher and told her and because I don't get into a lot of arguments at school it got sorted out. But for those girls who are always arguing, they don't get listened to. Teachers don't take it seriously, so it doesn't always get sorted out. Teachers just think they are the sort of people who just pick arguments with people. It can sometimes happen when you stick up for yourself and then you get labelled as trouble.'

Section five:

Girls' ideas and suggestions for improved strategies for addressing bullying

Introduction

Many of the suggestions made by the girls about how bullying can be tackled, correlate with the content of strategies and guidance already in place to address this issue in schools and other organisations. Some strategic approaches used in schools such as peer mentoring were viewed as having some value. Other approaches, for example placing written concerns about bullying into a 'suggestion/concerns box' were viewed as being unhelpful and pointless by one group of girls, as they didn't know what happened to the comments, or how follow up responses might take place.

Overall, the impression we had from the girls we spoke to was that they were not aware of a coherent approach to tackle bullying in the schools they attended or had attended, or in their communities. The Welsh Assembly Government's 'Respecting Others' 2003 guidance to schools on how to tackle bullying states that all schools must have an anti-bullying policy in place by law. The guidance also emphasises the need for monitoring the policy which should involve:

'A key member of staff identifies progress and enables follow-up, showing whether the policy is really effective... A low profile policy can be easily forgotten, and in subsequent years, new pupils need to be made aware of the policy.'

None of the girls we spoke to gave an indication of having participated in the updating or developing of their school, or other organisations', anti-bullying policy. As all were aged between 13 and 17, one would have expected to hear about such involvement, in a school context, if the Welsh Government guidance above was being adhered to.

Bullying is a major cause of school absenteeism and, as such, seriously undermines a young person's educational attainment, as well as their emotional wellbeing and mental health. 'In a study of 128 persistent school absentees from two inner-city schools in South Wales, 14.8% gave bullying as the reason for initially missing school, while 18.8% gave bullying as a reason for their continued absence'. Bullying is a dynamic problem, changing with the issues brought in by each new generation of pupils entering the school. Therefore, ensuring that schools have effective, updated, participative, anti-bullying policies is key to addressing young people's educational attainment and emotional wellbeing.

Recommendation 1

Take time to get a full picture of what has happened between people before deciding on a strategy to tackle the bullying.

As outlined above, girls' relationships are often complex and emotionally intense, and when they go wrong this can be overwhelming and difficult to

resolve. However, the girls expressed views about the need for adults addressing the problem to acquire a full and comprehensive picture of what has gone wrong and to avoid placing blame until a clear picture has emerged of what has occurred, and the underlying issues.

'I think talking about it can help, but I think you have to make sure you hear all sides.'

'The best way (to resolve issues) is to sit down and talk about it. And talk to those surrounding the bully, because their stories can sometimes differ and it's the best way to find out what's really gone on.'

'You can't sort stuff out in one little room. There's too much background to it, my friend's sister started bullying me, there is such a back history to bullying.'

'The Head of Year should have put them in a room one by one so you break up the group, and speak to them.'

'They should speak to the group leader, there's always a group leader'

'They should split them up, so they can give their own views, without the group leader influencing their views.'

'I think it should be talked through properly with all involved.'

'They need more work around all involved and not just punishment, a group of adults need to help those involved.'

'I think the onlookers could say what they've seen anonymously.'

Relationships in girls' bullying can be complex, often fed by information and misinformation pertaining to individuals, built up over long periods of time. It is important from the girls' perspective that attempts are made, by adults, to make some sense of what is going on in these relationships. It's important that each individual is given an opportunity in a safe, confidential situation to put their perspective of the course of events to the teacher or adult whose responsibility it is to address the issue.

'Respecting Others' (2003) contains examples of strategies used successfully by schools to address bullying. The guidance suggests that schools use 'a combination of strategies that can be drawn on and adapted to fit the circumstances of particular incidents'. In order to address the above, a school might use mediation in combination with other strategies more suitable to adolescents.

Recommendation 2

Preventative work is required to address improving social skills, understanding of the value of relationships, how they work, what difficulties can arise, and strategies for dealing with these.

'They should make strategies to help people make friends better.'

'I think anti-bullying should be taught younger, like at primary school.'

'In PSE we talk about bullying which I think helps a bit.'

‘It needs to be tackled earlier.’

‘Teachers don’t do anything if it’s only name calling, it has to build to a fight before teachers do anything, it should be tackled at the name calling stage.’

‘People get bullied because they don’t stick up for themselves. Maybe they could be taught to develop the skills to stick up for themselves.’

‘The Cardiff Against Bullying Strategy’ together with ‘Respecting Others’, advocates an early intervention approach with regard to addressing bullying. The foundation stone of such an approach involves organisations working with children and young people to create ‘a positive and inclusive ethos, which encourages healthy and respectful relationships’. Recommendations from ‘Respecting Others’ include that schools develop ‘a raft of preventative measures’ together with encouraging a ‘climate of positive concern’ within the school. However, as bullying can never be entirely eliminated, it also recommended that schools have ‘a reactive policy in place, which should be clear, effective and well publicised’.

The guidance is in place to respond to the needs the girls are flagging up with regard to addressing bullying. The question of why guidance is not being effectively implemented is one raised by this research. Estyn has, this academic year, started using a new inspection framework which includes ‘Wellbeing’ as a key outcome. The way that a school tackles bullying will be a fundamental component of achieving improved wellbeing across its community.

In 2007, Cardiff Children and Young People’s Partnership (CYPP) funded Barnardo’s Cymru to produce research into ‘Young people’s experiences of, and solutions to, identity related bullying’ which included the suggestion that PSE seminars should be developed ‘about bullying and psychology that examines the four roles within bullying. Any work with young people that focuses upon the emotions provoked by bullying should include power issues, peer relations and popularity and excitement as well as the harmful effects of bullying’.

This is not work that can be conducted in a piecemeal way. It’s clear from strategies and guidance that this approach is a component part of whole organisation approaches. Young people are in the best position to avoid bullying if they are given consistent messages from all adults and organisations working with them.

Recommendation 3

Peer mentoring systems have an important role to play in tackling bullying but also key adults, whose main role is to address bullying issues, need to be identified in schools.

‘If the mentor tells the teacher then it doesn’t seem the person being bullied is being a grass.’

‘Peer mentoring can work, I think it helps if the person is younger than teachers because children can relate to them better.’

‘I think schools should have somebody younger than teachers to help sort things out’

Peer mentoring approaches are clearly valued as a way of providing a bridge between the young people who are caught up in the bullying and the staff in schools who are in a position to address it.

'I think schools should have counsellors who are trained in bullying. Maybe they should be a bit younger than teachers so that children don't feel there is such a power imbalance.'

'Should have a specially trained bully counsellor in each school.'

Having counsellors who specialise in, or are specifically trained to address bullying, is a useful idea. However, the Estyn inspection framework and 'Everybody's Business' (2001): the child and adolescent mental health strategy for Wales, suggest that all frontline practitioners working with children and young people in schools should be equipped to deal with bullying as part of a whole school approach.

Recommendation 4

Training for teachers is required so that they recognise bullying and know how to address it.

'Teachers should be trained to recognise when bullying is happening.'

'Teachers should be specially trained to notice when bullying is taking place.'

'Tackling bullying in schools: A survey of effective practice' (Estyn 2006) makes the following points about the part school staff play in ensuring that schools can deliver on their anti-bullying policies:

- Good teachers are aware of the need to promote respect throughout the curriculum. They do not tolerate 'put down' comments between pupils and stress the unacceptability of negative personal comments.
- Effective teachers organise class groups to ensure that possible points of conflict are kept to a minimum.
- Staff in the most effective schools do not use bullying strategies such as using sarcasm, derogatory names or nicknames, in dealing with pupils.

Again the government guidance laid out for delivering anti-bullying practice in schools includes ensuring all teaching staff and other school personnel have the information and skills required to address the issues. An effective 'whole school' policy should be fully supported by all school staff. Since the guidance was published back in 2003, counselling services have been introduced in all Welsh schools, meaning that, as well as the availability of training via Cardiff Against Bullying, schools now have an improved emotional wellbeing and mental health resource available to them to support the effectiveness of anti-bullying practice. Unfortunately, some of the girls we interviewed were not in receipt of well informed, skilled teacher support in resolving bullying issues.

'Even when I asked for help teachers did nothing, They didn't believe me.'

'When I had my hair cut off the teacher didn't do anything. She said that she hadn't seen it therefore couldn't do anything about it.'

‘Teachers sort it out badly.’

‘Teachers say ‘it’s stopped now, don’t worry’. That’s all they say.’

Recommendation 5

Strategies to tackle bullying should take into consideration the emotional and social needs of both bully and bullied.

‘The bully needs support to develop her confidence, she needs to know her friends will be there if she stops bullying. The bullied needs to be shown how to hide her vulnerabilities, maybe she needs to speak with a counsellor to help her develop confidence.’

It’s very important to ensure that the bully has as much opportunity as possible to receive emotional and practical support to help control bullying behaviour and that extreme sanctions are the last resort.

Examples of strategies in ‘Respecting Others’ include mediation and the ‘No Blame’ approach. This involves setting up a support group around the bully including those involved in the bullying and the bystanders. In Estyn’s survey of effective practice, the need for sanctions, including fixed term and permanent exclusion, to hold a firm line with regard to maintaining acceptable behaviour and keeping children safe, are emphasised. Suggestions for dealing with bullies also include the employment of strategies which encourage victim empathy.

‘Some schools use the ‘circle of friends’ technique to do this where the school trains the pupils to

befriend the victims of bullying as well as the bullies themselves.’

These approaches, however, are most effectively and fairly employed within a whole school approach, where staff are trained to deal with bullying and are clear about the school’s strategy. As social and emotional issues often cross school, home and community boundaries, this needs to be considered. In their survey of good practice, Estyn found that:

‘The most effective schools include voluntary and community organisations and groups to make their school safe. Members of local communities, police and voluntary organisations work together to ensure that pupils are safe, both whilst on school premises and also whilst travelling to and from school.’

Organisations like Cardiff Against Bullying can support the school to provide specific interventions for bullies and victims of bullying in order to address their problems, as well as referring them on to other agencies for services.

Recommendation 6

No bullying should be ignored; all bullying incidents should be addressed thoroughly, with a series of follow-up stages if necessary.

‘There should be consequences and not just tell the bully to stop doing it.’

‘There should have been consequences at the point when she got hit.’

‘The teacher gets you to sign a contract to say things are resolved and that the bullying will not continue. But they just pretend to be friends and then the bullying starts again. You just go through the same process again and again.’

‘I think bullies should be shown the results and outcomes of how bullying affects people, and what the impact is on the person being bullied.’

Guidance on how to tackle bullying is founded on creating an atmosphere of open dialogue where children and young people are able to let adults know when bullying is taking place. ‘Respecting Others’ suggests a list of points to be followed when establishing a whole school approach including:

- Never ignore suspected bullying.
- Follow-up repeatedly, checking that bullying has not resumed.

Estyn’s survey of effective practice showed that the most effective schools had ‘a range of sanctions to deal with incidents of bullying’.¹ Staff at these schools understand these sanctions and implement them consistently.

Section Six: Conclusions

We were set the task of examining the nature and underlying issues affecting the negative peer relationships of vulnerable girls. The data gathered clearly indicates that girls' patterns of relating involve the development of close intimate relationships, where secrets can be shared and personal matters discussed. However, when girls' relationships fail, then the fallout can incur much psychological and emotional pain as girls can be very manipulative and cruel to each other. This cruelty involves spreading rumours, cyber bullying and the creation of gangs and networks which exclude and persecute the bullied girl. Sometimes this can become violent; however, most of the bullying is carried out without resorting to physical violence.

- Boys can play a part in feeding disagreements between girls, and in particular can be instrumental in provoking fights. Boys are viewed as resolving disagreements by fighting.
- In order to have relationships with peers, girls sometimes have to become involved in networks of negative, volatile and ultimately unsatisfying relationships. These usually establish in environments where there is no coherent, active thought through strategy to dealing with bullying behaviour.

- Bullying can have a major impact on girls' self-esteem. Strategies used by girls to avoid further bullying, where it has not been formally dealt with, can impact on the choices they make with regard to their education and career.
- All the recommendations made by girls to address bullying correspond with those made in research, strategies and guidance already in place. The question of why these strategies and guidance are not being implemented is one raised by this report and one which would merit further attention.

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