

Bullying - some strategies used in schools

The previous articles (see box) described the problem of bullying in schools and how parents might approach the problem. In this final article, *Cherry Hughes* outlines some of the strategies used by schools to prevent and respond to bullying when it is discovered.

Bullying is very much on the educational agenda as a major priority for action: it has been a subject for serious research since the 1980s and there is plenty of information available on managing it. The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) has played a key role in disseminating concern and producing high quality resources, a recent example being the booklet, 'Bullying, do not suffer in silence', that has been sent to all schools. The educational inspectorate, OFSTED has been instructed to prioritise 'bullying' in their inspections and charities, such as Kidscape and Childline, do invaluable work in supporting parents, children and schools with their advice lines and resources. It is acknowledged as a problem internationally and in fact in a recent survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of 315,000 15 year olds from 42 countries only 17% UK students came up with answers suggesting they were bullied at school, contrasting with 41% in Korea, and 32% in Belgium for example. Obviously in our schools there is a problem but it appears to be worse in other countries. So some of the common strategies discussed here must be having a positive effect.

Now it is generally agreed that the most important factor in dealing with this problem is a whole school policy that sets values based upon the acceptance of diversity and consideration for every pupil's individual needs. The devising of such a policy should involve the whole school community, and it needs to be monitored for its effectiveness and reviewed regularly. While the school is obliged to have a policy on bullying and make clear to parents, staff and pupils its strategies for dealing with it, the quality of this may vary. Therefore, a parent concerned about this issue really needs to find out from as many sources as possible whether practice mimics policy or is just a 'paper exercise'. Whatever strategies are developed and tried, effective communication with parents who should feel able to contact a named teacher is absolutely critical.

Strategies to deal with bullying usually integrate preventative work into the curriculum and respond in some of the ways described here. Good classroom practice from the age of five where children work in groups, considering different points of view and working co-operatively with others from both genders and varied ethnic backgrounds encourages the understanding of each other that is a vital component in the prevention of bullying. In primary schools, and now occasionally in secondary, specific problems that have arisen in class or in the playground may be addressed in 'circle time' when pupils talk in turn about issues that concern them.

An extension to this that requires very careful management by the teacher is the 'circle of friends' for a vulnerable pupil. This has been tried successfully with children as young as five. The class meets with a trained professional, an educational psychologist for example, who explains that it is unusual to talk about a pupil who is not present but that the pupil and his parents are supporting this. Following ground rules the class presents ways that they might help the pupil and a 'circle of friends' is set up to give support working with the class teacher.

This method depends on the good practice of providing information to pupils, perhaps through lessons in personal, health and social education. Sometimes an outside professional may contribute to this. I know of some speech and language therapists who, with the child's and parents' permission, are happy to talk to classes about the effects of stammering and the need for support from classmates.

Befriending, or the buddy system, is recommended for children from about nine by the DFES; in this a 'volunteer' friend is selected to befriend a pupil who is having difficulties or is simply just new to the school and feels a little lost. This system seems to work well if the selection process is carefully thought out and befrienders are given some simple rules to follow. The teacher needs to regularly check how it is working out and address any concerns promptly. In secondary schools older pupils may be trained to act as mentors for younger ones and provided the support for the mentor from staff is in place this can work well. The mentor can then act as a link between the troubled pupil and the staff. This method seems to work best when there is a drop-in centre at designated times and patrols during break times (when much bullying takes place) by the mentors. Incidents can then be promptly reported and dealt with.

A system which has some success with older pupils, builds on these practices of involving the pupils, by encouraging the bullies themselves to work to support the victim. This strategy which is becoming increasingly popular needs sensitive managing and careful monitoring and is really only possible in a school where there is a strong culture of pupil participation and co-operation. It is frequently described as the 'no blame approach' and has been criticised by some experts in the field, notably Michelle Elliott from Kidscape, who is concerned that it may not deter the bullies sufficiently.

An interesting initiative developed by South Wales police is showing good results: pupils elect a 'schoolwatch' management committee supported by the police and a designated teacher. They implement activities such as a 'bully box' where children can leave notes for staff, playground patrols by key pupils, a friendship garden, and community projects to encourage partnership and co-operation. The idea is to prevent bullying by building up a co-operative culture and to respond to any incidents as quickly as possible, giving prompt feedback to the victim and support or punishment to the bullies, as seems appropriate in a particular case.

Most schools will experiment with any system that has worked elsewhere as bullying taints the school environment. Most commonly, particularly in secondary schools, they will use approaches based on teacher intervention and parent and pupil partnership. Staff training in mediation skills has proved to be useful and a culture in which pupils feel confident about telling an adult about any incidents earlier rather than later is vital. It should be possible to do this without catching the attention of the bullies, through a note in a box for instance, or through regular meetings with a class teacher. Good communication with parents being a pre-requisite, so that their concerns are passed on efficiently and acted upon quickly.

Many children who are bullied lack self-esteem and confidence and training in assertiveness skills provided by professionals, or by the charity Kidscape, has had considerable success. Our children may have the benefit of support from speech and language therapists who are very aware of the need to develop these skills.

It is reassuring that bullying is now being taken so seriously in schools but nonetheless they can only do so much, as their populations will reflect the prevailing culture of the homes of their pupils, and the mass media society in which we all live. Children are not born knowing how to bully; they learn it from the models of behaviour around them. Bullying is not just a school problem; it is one about which our whole society should be concerned.

Recent publications:

Thompson, D. et. al (2003) *Bullying; effective strategies for long-term improvement.*
London: RoutledgeFalmer

Varnava, G. (2003) *How to stop bullying in your school; a guide for teachers.*
London: David Fulton

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