

## SCHOOL BULLYING — PROBLEMS AND ANSWERS Notes from a talk by Andrew Mellor

### WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT BULLYING?

Most of the research into school bullying has been inspired by the Scandinavian example. Norwegian academics such as Dan Olweus (Olweus 1993) and Erling Roland (Roland & Munthe 1989) report findings which have been confirmed by numerous other studies, including those carried out in Scotland (Mellor 1990):

- Bullying happens in all schools
- Approximately half of all pupils report having been bullied at some time
- The reported incidence of bullying decreases with age
- Boys are more likely to be involved in physical bullying than girls
- Bullying takes many different forms

The most comprehensive worldwide survey of research into school bullying is contained in: *The Nature of School Bullying - A Cross National Perspective* Edited by PK Smith, Y Morita et al pub. Routledge 1999.

### THE PROBLEMS

#### Problem number one

The first problem with bullying is that people often underestimate the damage that it can do, so let's get something straight. Bullying is not just kid's stuff. It's neither trivial (never did me any harm), nor does it have the character building qualities that some people claim for it. Make no mistake, school bullying can push people to the very edge of despair and can have effects that last throughout life, as this message to the Anti-Bullying Network's website shows: *I suffered at the hands of bullies throughout the whole of school. It turned me into a bitter person filled with nothing but hate and a total inability to form relationships. I have no self-confidence at all... I have very few friends.*

Recent research at Essex University confirms what victims, parents and teachers have told the ABN: that seriously bullied children are more likely to become adults who find it difficult to form relationships, do not achieve their full career potential and who are more likely to suffer from mental health problems: *I'm stuck in a dead end job because I didn't have the guts to go for my preferred career, and certainly lacked the confidence to apply myself.*

Of course, some people who are bullied do not suffer these effects: they find ways to cope with the experience. They get on with their lives relatively unscathed. But predicting which children will be significantly affected and which will not is difficult. Bullying that seems to an onlooker to be very serious — such as a physical assault — may not always produce the same psychological damage as something less visible, such as being repeatedly verbally humiliated or sent-to-Coventry.

*I've never talked about my experiences to anyone. I find them too humiliating to explain. I can't even put the whole scenario down to one specific event - it just went on and on and on. Many victims, like this one, report that it was difficult to tell anyone how they were feeling - or to ask for help. There are many reasons for this: fear of retribution, not trusting adults to act in a sensitive way, not wishing to suffer the humiliation of admitting to others that they can't cope — or perhaps a desire to protect an already stressed parent from further worries:*

*Looking back I'm amazed that I got through it. I couldn't talk to anyone. My mum was having a lot of trouble with my brother...*

It is possible to overstate the links that may exist between school bullying and suicide. Some estimates suggest that up to 12 children commit suicide in Britain each year as a result of being bullied at school but for every life lost there are thousands ruined:

*I went through a phase of self-harming, which I'm glad to say I no longer do. I still cry a lot when I think about it, and often find myself wishing to God I could be attractive.*

#### Problem number two

The second problem is that bullying is not one problem! The word is used to describe many different types of behaviour which have a variety of causes and effects.

#### Problem number three

The third problem is that it is not simple to stop. How could it be if it is as complicated as we now know it to be? Despite this there is no shortage of simple solutions on offer:

ignore them  
just hit them back son — that's what I did  
bring back the belt!

Oh dear.

Many parents who contact the Anti-Bullying Network are angry with teachers for failing to do enough to prevent bullying. In some cases their anger is justified, but in others their expectations are unreasonable.

## THE ANSWERS

### Answer number one

The first answer is that the problem must be addressed at all levels. Growing awareness in Scotland of the harm that can be caused by bullying has encouraged measures to be adopted at central government, local government and school level. The Scottish Executive (and the Scottish Office before that) has funded research, provided resources and guidance, and has set up the Anti-Bullying Network. Local councils have told their schools to develop anti-bullying policies, and have provided support and training for teachers.

But while support and guidance from central and local government is vital, the most important work to tackle bullying is that being done in schools by pupils, parents and teachers acting together. It is also important to remember those other members of school communities who have a role to play: the playground supervisors who have developed ways of encouraging children to help each other and to play more constructively; the school medical staff and psychologists who provide support to traumatised children; and the police officers who help to deal with those episodes of bullying which cross the boundaries between home and school.

### Answer number two

The second answer is to emphasise the importance of developing an ethos in which bullying is unacceptable and in which all feel free to speak up if bullying takes place. Secrecy and silence nurture bullying. So creating an atmosphere in which young people know that their concerns are going to be taken seriously and where they are actively involved in working out a policy on bullying is important. The anti-bullying strategies being developed in schools are teaching children important lessons about things such as empathy, assertiveness, rights and responsibilities. They are also encouraging openness, honesty, self-esteem and a respect for others.

Underpinning all this work lies the importance of school ethos. A positive ethos promotes positive discipline, encourages regular attendance, has high expectations of pupils and makes young people feel safe and secure, ready to learn. So developing a positive ethos is part of the concerted effort schools across Scotland are making to raise standards. It is not an optional extra.

### Answer number three

The third answer is to have a range of strategies which can be used to react to the many different types of bullying which occur. No single method can be used to deal with all bullying incidents. The way in which adults react to bullying contributes to the ethos of the school and can help to make it more or less likely that bullying will happen in future. Ignoring the problem encourages it to flourish. A heavy-handed approach can drive it underground. However, a positive, open response will encourage young people to speak up about matters that concern them and will improve the learning environment by promoting more caring and responsible patterns of behaviour.

How should schools react to particular incidents? This will depend upon:

1. The circumstances - always assess the true nature of an incident before applying any strategy. Group bullying or mobbing needs to be handled differently from problems created by an individual who persistently bullies others. Such a person's bullying may be merely one manifestation of a plethora of problems.
2. The existing practices and resources of the school - for example, if we want to encourage a counselling approach, potential counsellors should be given the training, time and support needed to fulfil the task.

Individual reactive strategies will be covered in a later workshop session.

### Answer number four

The fourth answer is to try to be ready for anything. Dealing with bullying effectively requires the creation of an ethos in which such problems can be discussed. Bullying is a key issue which opens the door to a number of related concerns. Adults who encourage young people to talk about matters that concern them must be prepared to deal with a multitude of problems.

I believe that schools which develop effective anti-bullying policies are better placed to support individual pupils who may be depressed - and better able to support staff who have to deal with critical events. Few schools have to deal with critical events like those that happened in Dunblane on 13th March 1996, but the events in Tasmania a year later remind us that devastating tragedy can strike anywhere, anytime. One positive result of the Dunblane tragedy is a document prepared by Stirling Council (<http://www.stirling.gov.uk>)

*Should Crisis Call - Crisis Management in Schools: Effective Preparation and Response*

This document states that, *the first step is acknowledging that such events actually can happen at your school. The second step is reviewing the possible types of critical event that can happen.* These could include the death of a student, member of staff or family member; crimes such as physical assault or the abduction of a child; accidents during a school trip; natural disasters; terrorism etc. The document aims to help schools to plan for this

wide range of possibilities, to put coping strategies in place, and to develop a caring and supportive ethos. It is this last aim which a focus on bullying can help to further.

## CONCLUSION

Putting a focus on school bullying can help schools to support individuals and create a more effective learning environment in which children will develop skills, values and knowledge which will assist them to assert their rights, accept their responsibilities and build better relationships.

In the long term, if we create a non-bullying ethos within a school and promote values such as self-esteem, openness, tolerance and caring, our children are less likely to become anti-social adults who misuse their power.

## Selected References and Resources

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Andrew Mellor is in the unusual position of being a teacher with 25 years experience who has also worked as a researcher and developer. He conducted the first substantial research into bullying in Scotland in 1988-90 and has written widely on the subject. He was seconded as the Scottish Anti-Bullying Development Officer from 1993 to 1995 when he played a major role in highlighting the seriousness of bullying in schools. He is regularly invited to contribute to seminars and conferences across the UK and internationally. In April 1999 he left his post as Principal Teacher of Guidance at Dalry School in Galloway to become Manager of the Anti-Bullying Network, which is a Scottish Executive funded service based at the University of Edinburgh.

## Where is the Anti-Bullying Network?

The Network is based at Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh.

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