

Dealing with bullying behaviour

In this resource we will cover what action you can take to tackle bullying.

Bullying behaviour can take place in any organisation or setting, but there are steps you can take to tackle bullying. Consider implementing the following actions:

Work with all members of your community to agree on a shared definition of bullying that is understood by all regardless of development stage or age. Explain that bullying behaviour of any kind will not be tolerated, and that everyone has a responsibility to take action to stop bullying if they know it is happening.

Make sure you regularly consult with members of your community to find out whether bullying is taking place, how safe children feel, what they feel is working well, and where they may need more support from pupils and from staff. This can be done through annual surveys, through focus groups, or through anonymous feedback on a more regular basis. Make sure that any consultation is fully accessible to disabled children and those with special educational needs – children that are the most vulnerable to bullying.

Work with the children in your community to agree acceptable behaviour and to create an anti-bullying policy/ keep the anti-bullying policy up to date. Make sure the policy is clear on action you will take to stop the bullying behaviour. Ask all new starters to sign the policy. Remember, the goal should always be to stop the bullying behaviour with any disciplinary measures applied fairly, consistently, and reasonably, taking account of any special educational needs or disabilities that the children or young people may have and taking into account the needs of those who may be vulnerable.

Reporting and recording bullying

Make sure you have systems in place so that all members of your community feel confident to report bullying behaviour. Be very clear that this is not 'snitching' but is vital for keeping everyone safe. Make sure that children know who they can talk to, and consider having anonymous reporting tools (whether online or through a box where students can drop notes).

Record all incidents with the action you have taken. Bullying is repetitive behaviour, and careful record keeping helps you to identify trends and regular offenders.

Investigating incidents

Take time to listen to all children involved. This includes the victim, the bully and any other children that have witnessed what has taken place. It can be helpful for children to keep a diary of events. Consider carefully whether any of the children involved are vulnerable in any way, whether there is an element of retaliation and any previous patterns of behaviour. Find out what action the victim needs you to take – both in the short and long term.

Searching students' property

Section 85 clause 3A of the Education Act 2011 states that a school doesn't need the consent of the child in question if they believe 'that there is a risk that serious harm will be caused to a person if the search is not carried out as a matter of urgency'. This could include concern that the child is carrying a prohibited item like a weapon, or any pornographic images. All these items can be confiscated without question. Any search that may take place must have two members of staff present; the searcher and the witness and ideally both would be of the same sex as the perpetrator. Any complaints by parents regarding the search must be made to the head teacher using the organisation's complaints procedure.

Learning from incidents

With every incident of bullying consider what you need to put in place to make sure it doesn't happen again. If the bullying was prejudice-related, or targeted at an issue like death or divorce, consider whether pupils and staff would benefit from further training or education in this area. If you feel out of your depth, then always seek help. There are a number of charities that can offer assistance such as Kidscape, AntiBullying Alliance, the Diana Award and Stonewall.

Working with group dynamics

Bullying is often a group behaviour and so in taking action it is important to listen to, and work with all those involved to make sure it doesn't happen again. It is also important to remember that children may hold different roles at different times, but are usually involved in some way or another. Research suggests that some of the worst outcomes are experienced by 'Bully-Victims'. These are children that experience bullying, and bully others. While we are using labels for the purposes of training, when working with children it is important to focus on the behaviour rather than the person. The ultimate goal is for the bullying behaviour to stop.

Working with victims

Listen carefully if a child tells you they are being bullied, and look out for the signs. Consider whether they are vulnerable in any way (for example if they are a disabled child or have a special educational need).

Never label the bullied child as the problem. Reassure the child that together you will make the behaviour stop. Ask them what they need you to do in the short and long term to help them get through the situation. Build up their confidence and self-esteem and help them develop assertiveness skills to handle bullying situations (see Kidscape for ZAP anti-bullying workshops). Agree an action plan together and regularly check in with them to be sure the bullying has stopped.

Working with bullies

Listen to their side of the story. Consider whether there is a history of bullying and aggressive behaviour. Explore what may be driving the behaviour – was it an act of retaliation, who else is involved, what do they hope to gain from the bullying behaviour. Help them to understand the impact it is having on the victim and agree that it needs to stop. Refer to your anti-bullying policy when issuing any disciplinary measures.

Check in with them to ensure the bullying has stopped.

Working with reinforcers

Listen to their side of the story. Explore the ways in which they were involved and what they could have done differently. Help them to understand the impact of their behaviour on the victim and the bully and agree that their behaviour needs to change. Refer to your anti-bullying policy when taking any disciplinary measures. Check in with them to ensure the bullying has stopped.

Working with bystanders or outsiders

Explore with them what they may or may not have witnessed. Talk with the whole class, group, or year group about the collective responsibility to support others that are experiencing bullying, ways they can do this (e.g. by leading victims away from the situation, by changing the subject, or sending a supportive message) and encourage them to alert school staff.

Defenders

Explore with them what has happened. Talk about the ways in which they supported the victim of bullying and how it has made a difference. Praise them for their positive behaviour and talk about ways they can continue to stand up for others and influence reinforcers and bullies to change their behaviour.

You may want to consider peer mentoring schemes such as those run by Kidscape and the Diana Award to further develop the confidence of your pupils in supporting one another.

Supporting all children to handle bullying situations

Support all children to be assertive in their relationships. This includes an understanding of personal boundaries and consensual touch, the confidence to say 'Stop!' or 'No!', what it means to respect difference in others, how to handle an aggressive or threatening person, how to disagree without causing hurt, and how to diffuse an argument or potential fight. It is also vital that from an early age you explore what it means to be a friend, how to deal with relationship fall-outs and what to do if someone is trying to manipulate or hurt you. For more information on assertive techniques visit the Kidscape website.

Supporting children with cyberbullying incidents

Cyberbullying can happen both inside and outside of school. Here are steps you can take to resolve an incident:

- If the incident has happened in school explore whether there has been a breach of your school ICT policy and whether you need to reinforce acceptable use of electronic devices on school property.
- Request any available evidence unless the bullying includes sharing of sexual images (do not request to see these but contact the police for support)
- If there is evidence that bullying has taken place work with every child involved as with any bullying incident. This includes supporting the victim, challenging the bully and any reinforcers, and working with the wider peer group to encourage pro-social behaviour. Explore whether the bullying has also been happening face-to-face as well as online.
- It may be that the victim wants to block the bully or report the bullying behaviour to the social network provider or gaming site. Make sure there is a member of staff that can support them with this (for more information see Internet Matters).
- If the cyberbullying includes threats of violence, sharing of images or videos where a child is being hurt, sharing of sexual images of a child, inciting others to self-harm or commit suicide, or could constitute a hate crime follow your safeguarding policy and contact the police.

Levels of bullying

With all incidents of bullying the ultimate goal must always be for the bullying behaviour to stop. The sooner you can nip the behaviour in the bud, the better.

When bullying behaviour appears relatively low level or has happened for the first time, support children to resolve things peacefully, if possible. Some children do not appreciate the distress they are causing and are willing to quickly change their behaviour and make amends.

Help all children involved in bullying behaviour to understand that it is unacceptable and that they must take responsibility for their actions, stop and make amends. If initial attempts to stop the bullying fail, consider what is driving the behaviour, any additional support needs that the child may have, and whether you need to issue sanctions. Typically, these are deprivations of a privilege of some sort. Regularly check in with the pupils involved.

In the case of serious incidents of bullying where a pupil has been deeply impacted you should consider informing parents or guardians of both the victim, and the bully. Work with all parents and guardians to agree an action plan for change, and keep them informed of any decisions you make (e.g. to use disciplinary sanctions). If you are concerned about the safety of a child then you must follow your safeguarding procedure. If you think a crime may have been committed (e.g. in the case of physical or sexual assault, threats of serious harm, hate crime) then contact the police for advice. If a child has been hurt, then seek medical support as soon as possible.

Working with parents and guardians

- Make sure that all parents and guardians understand your definition of bullying and have received and/or signed the school anti-bullying policy.
- Provide opportunities for parents and guardians to feed into your anti-bullying policy, or to take part in educational opportunities or celebration events (e.g. Safer Internet Day, Anti-Bullying Week)
- Make sure parents and guardians know who to contact if they have concerns about bullying behaviour. Respond as soon as possible and agree a timeframe for action.
- When you meet with parents and guardians make sure you create a relaxed environment and agree first and foremost that the goal is to stop the bullying behaviour (this is true whether their child is a victim or a bully).
- Agree an action plan for change and keep a careful record of all action taken.
- Encourage and support parents and guardians to seek additional help where appropriate. For example, if you have concerns about the mental health of a child they should be encouraged to see their GP.

Bullying in playgrounds and other areas

This section about playgrounds and bullying outside schools is for those in education, but the advice is transferable to other settings.

Regularly consult with children and young people to find out whether there are any bullying hot spots. This might include playgrounds, corridors, bus stops and fields. It can be helpful to draw a plan of your school or organisation and encourage children to put red stickers where bullying is most likely to happen. Work with them to agree on how best to minimise bullying in these areas. Agree rules and share with all members of your community.

Have different parts of the playground set out for games, quiet activities, playing with balls etc. Trouble often arises when children run into each other when playing. Consider supervised activities for children that find unstructured playtime particularly challenging. Stagger the times children play, if necessary.

Ensure that playground supervisors have been trained in how to identify and respond to bullying behaviour.

Consider setting up a peer mentoring or playground buddy scheme where other children are also trained to help others.

Some schools have installed CCTV on their premises to deter or record bullying behaviour. It is vital if you take this step to communicate your actions to all children, parents and guardians and explain how and why CCTV footage will be used. It is also vital that you stay on the right side of the law, following the advice of the ICO.

Bullying outside school premises

The Department for Education released the following statement with regard to bullying outside school premises:

'Head teachers have the legal power to make sure pupils behave outside of school premises (state schools only). This includes bullying that happens anywhere off the school premises, e.g. on public transport or in a town centre.'

Through Section 89 clause 5 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, head teachers have the power to discipline their students for any bullying incidents outside of school 'to such an extent that is reasonable.'

It is important that your anti-bullying policy explains how you will respond to reports of bullying outside school premises. Where bullying outside school is reported to school staff, it should be investigated and acted on. If the misbehaviour could be criminal or poses a serious threat to a member of the public, the police should be informed.

In all cases of misbehaviour or bullying the teacher can only discipline the pupil on school premises or elsewhere when the pupil is under the lawful control of the staff member.

Does this apply to cyberbullying?

One of the most common forms of bullying behaviour outside school premises is cyberbullying. It is important to remember that cyberbullying outside of school hours can be an extension of bullying behaviour that is taking place during the school day. Again, explain in your anti-bullying policy how you will respond to reports of cyberbullying (including incidents outside of school hours) and take action to ensure the bullying behaviour stops.

This information was current in June 2017.

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