



Findings of the comprehensive review of the literature:

Responding to Bullying among Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities

Briefing paper for Head teachers and school staff

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Background

A project was launched early in 2010, led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance working with key organisations, to review the effectiveness of a range of approaches to preventing and tackling the bullying of children with SEN and/or disabilities. This project set out to identify best practice in tackling SEN and/or disabilities-related bullying and then to recommend to schools those approaches with the most impact.

As part of this project, a team at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education carried out a scoping study¹ and a comprehensive review of the available literature² on this topic between February and July 2010. This review addressed four key questions:

- What evidence is there that children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing bullying and/or peer victimisation within the school context?
- What is particular about this group of children in respect of their vulnerability to bullying, in the context of their interactions with peers?
- What does the evidence tell us about the challenges that schools face in effectively preventing and responding to the bullying of children with SEN and/or disabilities?

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McLaughlin, C., Byers, R. and Peppin-Vaughan, R. (2009) *Responding to Bullying among Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities – Knowledge Phase: Part 1 – A scoping study*. London: Anti-Bullying Alliance.

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McLaughlin, C., Byers, R. and Peppin-Vaughan, R. (2010) *Responding to Bullying among Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities – Knowledge Phase: Part 2 – A comprehensive review of the literature*. London: Anti-Bullying Alliance.

- What does the evidence say are the most effective approaches that schools can take to a) preventing and b) responding to the bullying of children with SEN and/or disabilities?

The review team's final report and this briefing paper focus most significantly on the findings in relation to effective approaches that schools can take to preventing and responding to bullying and the implications that arise from these findings for policies and practices in schools.

The key findings of the review

Children with SEN and/or disabilities are disproportionately at risk

Bullying and victimisation among children with SEN and/or disabilities are key issues. The literature clearly confirms that these children face, in some cases, significantly increased risk of being bullied. Reports indicate that 80% of children with learning difficulties; 70% of children with autism; and 40% of children with speech and language difficulties are bullied and/or victimised. Some reports indicate that pupils with mild difficulties and/or hidden disabilities – and children receiving adult support – may be more at risk. Reports consistently confirm that victimisation and bullying are exacerbated by marginalisation and isolation. Interestingly, pupils affected by bullying and victimisation are found in both mainstream and special contexts; pupils with SEN and/or disabilities can be both bullies and victims.

Relational bullying and children with SEN and/or disabilities

The literature suggests that the bullying of children with SEN and/or disabilities tends to be more relational than direct. Although both forms of bullying are present, peer isolation and peer difficulties are more common. Pupils with SEN and/or disabilities have extensive experience of being subjected to ridicule, social manipulation and name-calling. Newer forms of bullying – such as cyber bullying, sexual victimisation and social manipulation – also apply to pupils with SEN and/or disabilities. Some of the bullying experienced by children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities is extreme. The literature reveals a continuum of problems extending from isolation and ostracism through physical and sexual abuse to hate crime.

Social skills, language and communication

Children with SEN and/or disabilities have many characteristics that may make them more vulnerable to bullying. However, social skills, language and communication emerge as key issues in much of the bullying that affects pupils with SEN and/or disabilities. Social behaviours are crucially important with regard to peer victimisation since the ability to understand social behaviour and to communicate effectively in social situations are central to social engagement. Language and communication are key elements in the development of social competence, so even subtle shifts in children's responses within the peer group can make them vulnerable to ostracism and teasing. Social acceptance by the peer group emerges from the literature as a key factor in reducing vulnerability to bullying and victimisation. The school context and the social fabric of the classroom and are therefore important, but inclusion in mainstream settings does not automatically resolve problems of bullying and victimisation. Language, communication, social skills and social opportunity are crucial issues in developing protection for young people with SEN and/or disabilities.

The challenges faced by schools

Schools face a number of challenges in identifying, responding to and preventing the bullying and victimisation of children with SEN and/or disabilities. Detecting existing levels of bullying and the forms of victimisation that occur can, in itself, be problematic. Schools are also challenged by the logistics of implementing intervention strategies, whether at the level of school management; the implementation of whole-school policy; the raising of teacher awareness; or in terms of the willingness to address the issues that emerge at the level of day-to-day practice.

Implications for policy and practice

Teaching communication and language skills

Direct work on language and communication skills has a central place in the development of responses to the bullying and victimisation of children with SEN and/or disabilities. The evidence indicates that relatively minor interruptions in the social interactions that occur within the peer group can place pupils at risk; young people with a range of disabilities and impairments but who communicate and interact freely with their peers are less vulnerable. Schools should place language and communication at the centre of the curriculum where pupils have SEN and/or disabilities and place a strong emphasis on expressive communication skills and advocacy, as well as alternative and augmentative modes of communication.

Teaching social skills

The social context is of crucial importance and social competence with peers is a key factor in protecting pupils from bullying and victimisation. Pupils who are isolated from their peer group (for example, through separate teaching arrangements or by the constant presence of adult support) are at greater risk. Schools should regard the development of social and interactional skills among pupils with SEN and/or disabilities as a key task. The curriculum for social education should be expanded in both special and mainstream schools and schools should take responsibility for fostering social development among young people as well as providing educational opportunities.

Schools should extend their thinking to take account of the needs of young people with SEN and/or disabilities during the 'non-teaching' parts of the school day. The experiences of young people at these times should be monitored and improved. Adults in schools should take responsibility for these potentially important social opportunities and for pro-actively developing positive peer relationships at these and other times.

Roles for school staff

The literature consistently suggests that school staff tend to underestimate, to be unaware of, or to ignore the teasing, bullying and victimisation of children with SEN and/or disabilities. They may also place more trust in teacher ratings as opposed to self-reports. Adults in schools should become more aware of the views of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities and learn to access them more effectively. Professional development opportunities should be used to promote awareness of the bullying of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities and develop the skills of staff in using appropriate interventions.

There is some evidence that particular forms of support for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities can increase their vulnerability. Being seen as in need of 'help' and isolation from teachers and peers are risk factors for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities. Schools should subject the provision of adult support to careful scrutiny so that the nature of the support and its likely impacts are evaluated. Support staff should be trained in the personal, social and emotional aspects of learning; the social factors involved in bullying; the evidence on effective interventions; and the effects of marginalisation from the peer group.

Roles for peers

Peers play a key role in reducing bullying and victimisation and peer support for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities, appropriately introduced and monitored, is a key area for development in schools. Young people who have even the implicit support of sympathetic bystanders tend to be less vulnerable. Having acquaintances in the peer group can afford protection, even if those peers cannot be defined as friends. Special and mainstream schools should do more work on the development of peer support arrangements as a matter of policy. Although there is not yet enough evidence to confirm the most effective approaches, peers as buddies, mentors and active and supportive bystanders are all areas that could be developed in order to address the bullying and victimisation of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities.

Managing pupil groupings

Some of the forms of organisation that are used by schools in their responses to pupils with SEN and/or disabilities can increase their vulnerability to bullying and victimisation. For example, pupils with SEN and/or disabilities who are placed in mainstream schools that do not provide any interventions targeting SEN and/or disability-related bullying can be more vulnerable to victimisation than those who are placed in special schools. Further, teaching in separate groupings and the "withdrawal" of pupils for individualised teaching can also increase the marginalisation, and hence the vulnerability to bullying, of learners with SEN and/or disabilities. Schools need to develop approaches to pupil grouping that are informed by social as well as educational priorities.

Schools should also become more sophisticated in their responses to difference. Awareness and empathy can be strong agents of change and bring out the best qualities in peers but locational integration in mainstream settings is not enough. Schools should consider the value of highlighting particular forms of difference in order to build empathy and understanding in the peer group and active responsibility among peers for the well-being of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities.

Future research and development

There is a large body of persuasive evidence to confirm that the bullying and victimisation of children with SEN and/or disabilities are pervasive and significant problems. There is less evidence of schools developing and implementing effective strategies in order to address these issues. Clearly there is a need to undertake further work in identifying useful practices; gathering evidence of effectiveness; supporting schools to further develop emerging responses; consolidating improved ways of working; and disseminating the outcomes of this evaluative and developmental work.

Wider consultations focused on these objectives took place with an expert group in the late summer and autumn of 2010. The outcomes of these consultations are now available as a report on Validating Practice³. This report indicates that there is a need for more research on preventative whole-school initiatives and on the development of reactive strategies. It also suggests that schools should engage with the methodological challenges entailed in accessing the views of young people with SEN and/or disabilities in order to draw upon their direct experiences in monitoring instances of bullying. Schools should also be aware of the value of pupils, including those with SEN and/or disabilities, becoming involved in research and development processes and making direct contributions to school improvement.

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McLaughlin, C., Byers, R. and Oliver, C. (2011) *Responding to Bullying among Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities – Knowledge Phase: Part 3 – Validating Practice*. London: Anti-Bullying Alliance.