

ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Making it work together

LET'S STOP BULLYING

Bullying is a serious issue and can be a distressing experience for all concerned.

All children and young people have the right to an education and should receive that education within a safe and positive learning environment. Bullying is not acceptable in any form.

A high proportion of pupils will be victims of bullying at some point during their time at school. Even schools without a “bullying problem” cannot be complacent. The potential for bullying exists in every school.

A person who is being bullied will feel unable to stop it happening. The effects of bullying can be physical and/or psychological in nature. The child being bullied may experience distress, fear and feelings of low self-worth. Experiences of bullying may lead to illness or periods of absence from school. Even where a pupil’s attendance at school is not affected, their education may still suffer due to the distraction and anxiety caused by bullying. It is vitally important that all children and young people are given the support they need.

Children accused of bullying may need just as much help as those being bullied. Their behaviour may be connected to personal or social problems. They may be being manipulated by other children. Individuals may be playing a small part in group bullying and not understand the collective harm being done to a victim. And, of course, children may be falsely or mistakenly accused.

This leaflet attempts to answer many of the questions normally asked by parents, carers and other family members concerned about bullying, to promote a better understanding of how these issues affect children and young people and outline how family members can be supportive where there are concerns about bullying.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying occurs where any person FEELS like they are being bullied. Actions may be perceived as bullying when that is not the intention behind them. Nevertheless, if a person feels upset or hurt by any action then this is a problem which must be addressed. Something must be done to prevent similar effects in the future. This may be by stopping the “bullying” actions, or by better informing the attitudes and perceptions of those involved.

Bullying can take many different forms – physical, verbal or psychological - but all of them are wrong and can compromise a child’s safety or mental well-being. Bullying may be carried out by a group or by an individual. It may involve hitting, kicking, threats, name-calling, or less obvious forms such as “being sent to Coventry”. Abusive or threatening text messages, e-mails and websites are also forms of bullying, as is abusive graffiti or letters.

Bullying is similar to harassment and other forms of abuse such as racism, sexism and the abuse of children by adults.

The person or people doing the bullying may be the same age, older or younger than their victim. Both sexes bully and are bullied.

Bullying is certainly not new, but in the past it was often ignored, or dismissed as an undesirable, but inevitable part of life. In the last few years this way of thinking has changed and increasing attention has been paid to the rights and responsibilities of adults and children. Important among these are that:

- Everyone has the right to work and to learn in an atmosphere that is free from fear.
- All of us have a responsibility to ensure that we do not abuse or bully others.

- Young people should talk to an adult if they are worried about bullying and have a right to expect that their concerns will be listened to and treated seriously.
- Young people should be involved in decision making about matters that concern them.
- We all have a duty to work together to protect vulnerable individuals from bullying and other forms of abuse.

IS BULLYING A CRIME?

Many of the things we call bullying can indeed be crimes. For example, hitting or kicking is an assault and extortion is a kind of theft.

Everyone has the right to report to the police any incident they consider may be illegal. Such incidents may occur in or out of school. If a school does not report the incident, this does not prevent anyone else from doing so. Where a child is injured, you may wish to have the injuries treated and recorded by a medical practitioner.

It is then for the police to decide whether any further action is appropriate. They may simply talk to the people involved or they may discuss a suitable response with teachers. Only if they are satisfied that there is good evidence that a significant incident has taken place are they able to charge someone or refer them to the Children's Reporter.

Often however, by working together, teachers, parents and pupils are able to resolve incidents themselves much more quickly and satisfactorily than if the police or courts were involved.

SPOTTING THE SIGNS

There is no certain way of spotting that a child is being bullied. Things such as unexplained illness, reluctance to go to school, bruising, or torn clothes may all have a simple explanation, or they may be the result of something more serious.

Children can go to very great lengths to hide from adults the fact that they are being bullied. They may not want to “tell tales” or “grass”. They may not want to appear cowardly or weak. Often they believe that talking to an adult will make matters worse or that the adult will be unable or unwilling to help them.

The best advice is to trust your instincts – if you are worried, discuss your worries frankly with your child. However, take care not to let any anxiety you may feel add to your child’s problems. Fear of bullying can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: an over-anxious child may appear more vulnerable and as such become more at risk of being bullied.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT?

Bullying, even that which seems minor to an observer can have serious, lasting consequences for the victim. Therefore, all bullying should be treated seriously.

It is vital that parents, pupils, teachers and other members of a school community work together to develop an anti-bullying policy which everyone supports. All schools are expected to have such a policy in place, indicating how the issue of bullying will be raised within the school curriculum and how incidents will be dealt with.

But that does not mean that the response should always be the same. Regard should be had to the circumstances of each instance of bullying and of the particular individuals involved.

Punishment of bullies is not the only way of tackling the problem. And it may not be the best. Children can often behave inappropriately because they are having difficulties coping with certain challenges in their lives. Where this is the case, the bullying behaviour is likely to continue unless these children receive the support they need. Many schools have adopted no-blame, shared concern and peer-support strategies which have proven very effective. The best strategies address the problems of both bullying and bullied children and involve bystanders in a positive way.

Schools cannot be expected to deal with bullying if they are not told that it is happening. A child being bullied may find it difficult to tell school staff about the problem, but it is imperative that they do so, and that the school is given a reasonable opportunity to address the problem. Do not assume that because the bullying is taking place in school grounds, or even in the classroom, that school staff are aware of the problem, or, perhaps more importantly, are aware of its effects on the child being bullied.

Talking about bullying – bringing it out into the open - is the key. But this is also a key which can unlock the door to unhappy secrets. Adults who encourage children to speak out must be prepared to react to any problems they find and seek appropriate help and support for the children involved.

The best way to prevent bullying is to create an atmosphere, in schools and in homes, in which bullying is openly talked about, where adults provide non-bullying role models and where an agreed code of behaviour is accepted by all.

Some schools have gone further than others towards the creation of an open and positive atmosphere but the following problems remain:

- While some bullying is relatively easy to stop, some is not.
- No teacher, parent, carer or other family member can promise to prevent all bullying, although all adults should do their best to help and support a bullied child.
- Bullying happens in so many different ways and the circumstances surrounding bullying incidents differ so widely, it is unwise to respond to all incidents in the same way. If one strategy doesn't work, another should be tried. This can take some time.
- Parents and teachers do not always agree on what is bullying and what is not.
- Schools and education authorities have a responsibility to protect those being bullied but also have a responsibility to provide an education to all children and young people, which includes those who may be bullying, and/or have behavioural problems.
- The family of a child who is or has been bullied will often demand the exclusion from school of the child who is bullying. However, a child cannot be excluded unless the circumstances fall within certain legislative criteria. Bullying is often difficult to prove as it usually happens in places hidden from adults.

It is essential that the families of the child being bullied co-operate with the school and/or the education department of the local Council. It is also vitally important that the parents or carers of bullying children work with the school to resolve the problem, in the interests of their child as well as the victim.

TALKING TO CHILDREN

Here are some things to remember if you are talking to a member of your family who you think may be being bullied:

- **Be patient - make time to listen.**
- **Ask questions, but do it sensitively - don't interrogate.**
- **Show that you care. Be careful not to say or do anything which could make an already anxious or lonely child feel even more isolated.**
- **Making promises you can't keep may damage the trust between you and the child. Do not promise confidentiality in an effort to make it easier for the child to speak. If a child is in serious danger, whether that danger comes from an adult or another child, then you have a responsibility to act even if the child wants you to do nothing.**
- **Do not take action before you discuss with your child what you could do, and what he or she could do. It may take a little longer for you to agree the best thing to do than if the decision is taken by yourself alone, but this is time well spent. Tell the child that you will ask teachers not to do anything without talking to you and the child first.**
- **Make sure you do something. If bullying goes on for a long time it can cause serious damage to a child's educational and personal development and may be causing them psychological distress.**
- **Tell your child that he or she has done the right thing by talking about what has happened, that bullying is wrong, and that those who are bullying must change their behaviour.**

TALKING TO TEACHERS

If someone in your family is being bullied at school you must talk to a teacher at once. Telephone first to make an appointment through the Headteacher's office. In a primary school you could ask to talk to the class teacher; in a secondary school it could be a guidance teacher. If that person is not available ask to speak to the Headteacher or to the Deputy Headteacher. Ask for a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy to be made available to you either before your arranged meeting, or when you arrive.

When you make an appointment, say if you think the matter is serious or urgent. If it is, you should ask to speak to the Headteacher right away if he or she is available.

You may well be upset when you speak to the teacher so here is a checklist of things to remember:

- Make a note of everything you know about the bullying before you speak to the teacher so that you do not forget to mention any important points.
- Do not exaggerate. Be honest and stick to the facts as you know them. Teachers need to know as much about the bullying as possible if they are to make judgements about the best course of action.
- Remember that this may be the first time that the teacher has heard about the bullying. You may need to give them time to investigate matters further. However, this should not prevent them from making arrangements for your child in the interim.

- **Remember that your child may not have told you all the facts. Be prepared to consider other information and other people's points of view and be reasonable in your consideration and your response.**
- **Concentrate on your own child. You have a right to expect that teachers do all that is reasonable in the situation to protect your child from bullying or harassment. You do not have a right to demand that a particular action be taken against somebody else's child – even if that child is bullying yours.**
- **Find out what action the school intends to take. Remember that teachers may not be able to tell you all the action they propose to take. For example, confidentiality rules might prevent a teacher from telling you that somebody else's child was to be referred to social services or the Children's Reporter.**
- **Discuss any proposed action with your child – if he or she is not at the meeting, and it is reasonable to do so, ask the teachers not to take action until you have been able to discuss this with your child.**
- **Arrange to contact the school again so that you can discuss the result of any action that has been proposed.**
- **After the meeting you may wish to make a note of anything that has been decided and send a copy to the teacher.**
- **Be persistent. If you are not happy with the action proposed, make an appointment to see the Headteacher.**

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

Bullying in school can only be solved if parents, carers, teachers, pupils and other members of the school community all work together.

However, sometimes parents and pupils are not satisfied with the way that schools have dealt with their worries. If you are in this situation here are some things you can do:

- **Ask yourself if you have given the school sufficient time to deal with the matter. Bullying can be complex and difficult to solve.**
- **If you are still not satisfied, and if your child's school is under the control of a local authority or Council, then you should contact the Education Department (this is also known as the education authority). Contact details will be in your local telephone directory. If the school is not under local authority control, contact those who run the school (you have a contractual relationship with the school and can discuss whether they are fulfilling their contractual obligations, and whether they are following their anti-bullying strategy, if they have one). Explain clearly, preferably in writing, what has happened and what you would like the school to do.**
- **Schools will generally do their best to deal with bullying. However there may be cases which schools cannot solve, such as when bullying takes place outside school. In such cases, or in cases of serious assault or harassment, you should contact the police.**
- **Some parents have moved their children to other schools because of bullying. If you follow the advice in this leaflet that should not be necessary, however the option is one you can discuss with the education department of your local authority.**

- **If you are not satisfied with the response of the education authority, you should follow the appropriate grievance procedures, details of which can be obtained from the offices of your local authority's Chief Executive.**
- **If you have exhausted all the above options, you may wish to contact your local Councillor (local authority schools only), your Member of the Scottish Parliament, or the Scottish Education Minister. You should be aware, however, that they are not generally able to intervene directly in individual cases of bullying and the most they may be able to do is make some inquiries on your behalf.**
- **If you feel that a school or education authority has failed in its duty to provide an adequate and efficient education for your child, or to take reasonable care of your child's safety, you have the right to seek legal advice. However, pursuing legal action through the courts may not be the quickest nor the best way to resolve the situation for your child.**

FURTHER INFORMATION

Parentline Scotland is a free, confidential and anonymous helpline for parents, provided by Children 1st on **0808 800 2222**. Lines are open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 10am-1pm, Tuesday and Thursday, 6pm-9pm and Saturday and Sunday, 2pm-5pm.

The Scottish Anti-Bullying Network (ABN) offers free information for parents, pupils and teachers about bullying and how to tackle it. The InfoLine **0131 651 6100** is available during school term time, Monday to Friday, 9.30am-12.30pm and 2pm-4pm. The ABN can also be contacted via its website at www.antibullying.net

Parent Zone is a one-stop-shop for parents and carers looking for information about school education and can be accessed via its website at www.ngflscotland.gov.uk/parentzone

More information regarding independent schools can be obtained from the Independent Schools Information Service on **0131 220 2706** or via its website at www.isis.org.uk

Your child may benefit from knowing the existence of ChildLine's special Bullying Helpline on Freephone **0800 44 11 11**, open Monday to Friday, 3.30pm – 9.30pm. This is a free, confidential telephone advice line and provides an excellent service to any child or young person concerned about bullying.

Outwith these hours the main ChildLine number **0800 11 11** may be contacted. This is open 24 hours a day.

Enquire provides information about schools for young people with special needs on **0131 222 2400** or via its website at www.enquire.org.uk

A fact sheet about the bullying of people with learning disabilities is available from the Scottish branch of the charity, ENABLE on **0141 226 4541**.

Information about anti-racism is available from the Commission for Racial Equality on **0207 828 7022** or via its website at www.cre.gov.uk/scotland

“Bullying and How to Fight It - A Guide For Families”, written by Andrew Mellor, is a useful booklet which provides practical advice on how families can tackle bullying. It costs £4 (including postage and packing) from bookshops or from SCRE, 15 St. John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR.

This leaflet is aimed at providing information relevant to families that are worried about bullying in school. It has been prepared by the Anti-Bullying Network (ABN), in collaboration with the Scottish Executive.

It contains information on how to respond to, and help prevent, bullying and harassment of children and young people.

For further information:

Anti-Bullying Network
Moray House Institute of Education
University of Edinburgh
Holyrood Road
EDINBURGH
EH8 8AQ

For additional copies of this leaflet:

Pupil Support & Inclusion Division
Education Department
Scottish Executive
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