



Responding to bullying among children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities: the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities

Briefing Paper

*'The kids that bullied me found out how to put my chair onto manual and wheeled me into a bush. The teachers knew and none of them did anything about it. They didn't believe me and said it must have been an accident.'*¹

Introduction

This briefing forms part of the suite of briefings for school leaders, teachers and policy makers emerging from the current (2010) work of the Anti-Bullying Alliance² on the issue of the bullying of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities in schools. Themes emerging from the accompanying literature review³ were used to frame the discussions that the **Council for Disabled Children** facilitated with children and young people in developing this briefing during the late summer and autumn of 2010.

What follows is based on the views of disabled children and young people on this issue⁴. It highlights some of the key themes arising from their experiences of bullying, and it

¹ Disabled Children's Manifesto for Change

² Full project outline and further materials at www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

³ McLaughlin, C., Byers, R., Peppin-Vaughn, R., (2010) *Responding to the bullying of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities: a comprehensive literature review*, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education for the Anti-Bullying Alliance

⁴ This briefing is based on consultation with over 80 disabled children and young people, between the ages of 5 and 19 years. The young people had a range of physical, behavioural, emotional, learning and sensory impairments. In addition, the focus groups were held in a range of educational settings, covering

explores some of the key ways they feel bullying could be more effectively prevented and responded to when it happens in school.

'In your letter there's the word disabled – you put down exactly the reason we're being bullied. The word disabled explains why we're bullied.'

Key themes from disabled children and young people's experiences of bullying

Bullying behaviours

Disabled children, like all children, identified and had experienced a wide range of bullying behaviours, which included:

- **Verbal abuse.** In addition to comments directly targeted at disabled children related to their impairment this also encompassed the general use of derogatory language about disability, which was commonly used by other children and often went unchallenged.
- **Physical violence.** This was particularly reported by young people with physical impairments, who said other children repeatedly pushed past them in the corridors or play areas.
- **Threats, fear and intimidation**
- **Extortion**
- High levels of **exclusion** and **isolation**, within peer groups.
- **Manipulation and coercion.** For example, children being coerced by other children into doing something, such as misbehaving in the classroom, for the 'reward' of friendship; and being manipulated into taking the blame for the actions of another child.
- **Theft and/or hiding their belongings**
- **False friendships** – Where children act as 'friends' in front of teachers, but engage in low-level bullying and manipulation when out of view.

All the disabled children and young people who participated in this consultation had experienced bullying. However, their experiences and the levels of bullying experienced appeared to be strongly related to the ethos of the individual school towards bullying

and how effectively the school itself responded to bullying. The type of setting itself (for example, whether it was a mainstream or special school) did not appear to correlate with higher levels of risk or safety.

Difference and Disability

'I was at school once, and they called me a word. It was spastic. It didn't bother me at first, but then a week went on and they called me it again and called me it again. Over and over.'

The apparent ethos of the school and their commitment to tackling bullying had a significant impact on children and young people's understanding of why bullying happens. All children related the causes of bullying to 'difference' in some form or another. However, their understanding of difference varied greatly and appeared strongly linked to the way in which their individual schools framed this issue.

Thus, in schools where children felt safe and listened to, and knew that bullying incidents would be responded to effectively, their understanding of difference and thus why children are bullied, extended beyond disability.

In settings where there appeared to be a less effective approach to bullying, disabled children's understanding of difference and thus why they, and other disabled pupils were bullied, centred very strongly on disability only.

'The reason [that we are getting bullied [is] because you're in a wheelchair and they pick on you because you're not like them, do know what I mean? Child 2: "Yeah, and 'cos you're not like normal people. I mean we're all normal, but other people don't think so. Really, everybody's the same.'

Effects of bullying on disabled children and young people

Some of the children had been severely affected by bullying: some avoided school, and a few even said that the bullying had made them feel suicidal.

'Stops you doing stuff - scared of going places.'

For many disabled children and young people, repeated bullying which had not been responded to effectively had led to them developing a very negative self-identity, related to their impairment. Some children reported that due to being disabled, they had been told by staff, that they should 'learn to live' with bullying.

As a result, many disabled children and young people, had developed very individualised and internalised responses to bullying. They felt that they should remove themselves from, or completely avoid some situations, adapting their own behaviour and use of space, rather than seeing preventing bullying as everyone's responsibility.

This was particularly stark for young people with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, where image perception was one of the key ways they felt bullying could be prevented. For example, in order to protect themselves from bullying, they felt they needed to present themselves as being 'tough' or 'hard', to deter other children from bullying them.

'You can't do 'owt really to stop it...can't fight back...can't tell. Makes me feel like not coming to school...don't know why I come to this school.'

Reporting bullying when it happens

'If someone is bullying you, then tell your teacher 'n they sort it out. They just... sort it out.'

Feeling able to report bullying when it happened was a significant issue for disabled children and young people. Their willingness to 'tell' varied greatly from school to school, and appeared to be related to whether or not they felt anyone would listen, whether they would be believed and if the school would be able to do anything to stop the bullying.

'At my old school they called me 'specy 4 eyes' and I went to tell a teacher and they said 'just ignore it.'

One of the key issues that prevented disabled children from reporting bullying was the fear of retaliation. Many children felt reporting bullying would simply make the situation worse and thus they chose to endure this, rather than risk exacerbating an already difficult situation.

'You can't do anything about it. You can't tell. Two reasons – 1... you don't know their name [said due to size of the school] so they'll get away with it, 2... you'll get bullied even more cos they'll call you a grasser.'

'If you tell they'll beat you up more'

'Grassing makes things worse – makes you scared to tell – like blackmail.'

Not being believed

Not being believed when reporting bullying, was a key concern and experience of many disabled children, which impacted heavily on their willingness and confidence to report bullying. This was particularly common amongst children with learning difficulties or Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

In addition, even when disabled children did report bullying, they often reported that teachers didn't listen to them, respond effectively or discuss with them about what response they would like to the situation. For example, many children wanted support from the teacher to try and talk with the other child, to try and resolve the situation and

make friends, but they reported that the teacher often just issued a sanction, which was ineffective and often exacerbated the problem.

Where disabled children had experienced not being believed or listened to, they reported that were significantly less likely to try and talk to an adult about bullying in the future.

Child 1: 'The teachers don't sort it out. The TA does though.'

Facilitator: 'What's different about the TA? What does she do differently?'

Child 1: 'She does something about it... teachers don't take any notice... she listens.'

Child 2: 'She listens to us, finds out what we want... then goes and sorts it out in our way.'

'They don't always believe you when you tell.'

'Makes upset when don't listen what say. Upset.'

'Upset... we're trying to tell the truth, but then we get in trouble for lying and they [the bully] gets nothing. It makes me angry.'

Retaliation

Many disabled children who felt bullying wasn't being responded to effectively felt that they were pushed to the limits and when they eventually retaliated through sheer frustration, they were the ones who got into trouble and were subjected to sanctions.

'I got excluded, because all the winding up, like, it happened so often and no one did anything about it, that I just got really angry and couldn't control myself any more. Eventually I ended up taking my anger out on someone... and as a result I got excluded, because I was considered a health and safety matter by the school.'

The effect of bullying that occurs outside of school

Many disabled children and young people had experienced bullying outside school – in their communities and often, on the way to or from school. This also had a significant impact on their time in school, their ability to learn, and feel safe and secure in their environment.

'...outside. In playground and out of school. Because that's the best time you can get people because there's no teachers around to stop em.'

'...sometimes people go outside your house just for fun and chuck stuff at your windows.'

'Near the shops where there's like gangs that wait outside, n make you give em your money n' stuff.'

'At night time.' (child at a residential school)

Disabled children and young people's views on ways to prevent and respond to bullying

Disabled children and young people proposed many ways in which bullying could be more effectively prevented and responded to. On the whole disabled children strongly supported and preferred non-punitive or non-sanction-based responses to bullying. Most thought sanction-based approaches often made the situation worse and created a fear of retaliation, making the perpetrator more likely to rebel against the imposed sanction.

Very few supported sanction-based approaches unless the bullying was long-term and all other approaches had failed. Those who did were children who had experienced long-term, severe bullying, and who had reached breaking point.

Disabled children spoke passionately and maturely about understanding and valuing difference and disability as an effective way to prevent bullying occurring in the first place. They proposed responses to bullying that looked beyond the specific act or incident and which focused on enabling children to understand each other and work to develop a friendship or mutual solution.

Prevention

- *Understanding and valuing difference and disability*

Disabled children and young people strongly believed that if other children were supported to understand and value difference and disability, then this would be an effective way to prevent 'disablist' bullying.

This included disability awareness and equality training and lessons for pupils, teachers and support staff; positive images of disability within the school setting; and disability being visible and portrayed positively, throughout the school curriculum.

Disabled children were keen to be involved in this and work in partnership with teachers, to raise awareness of disability equality and bullying. In addition to preventing bullying, they also felt this would develop the confidence of disabled pupils and enable them to develop a positive self-identity, and awareness of their rights to not be bullied.

'Right, I forgot what you call it, like disabled stuff. Like more people with different abilities so people would understand more.'

'I want schools to take bullying more seriously – disabled children are more vulnerable to bullying. Teachers could teach classes about disability...disabled kids could help if they wanted to. A bit like a new lesson!'

- *Awareness of bullying and the rules about bullying: developed and agreed by all students*

'Could do like, an assembly or play about bullying and disability.... Or a rap. Should show it to everyone.'

'I think it was about 2 years ago, I was in school, 'erm, I think they got a Power Point or whatever 'n they gave a question about someone being bullied n gave you a few choices do you.... do you laugh n join in, do you get a teacher, do you stop it yourself... do you walk away.'

Disabled children spoke passionately about the need for all children and young people to be aware of what bullying is; the rules about bullying within the school environment; and what they should do if they witness or experience bullying.

They felt strongly that all children and young people should be involved in developing these rules, so that they understood them and felt ownership of them – making it more likely that they will be adhered to. They believed these should be highly visible around the school and presented in accessible formats (such as using pictures and symbols) to ensure that all children could access, understand them and know they have the right to be protected from bullying.

- *Participation*

Evident throughout all of disabled children and young people's suggestions was their desire to work in partnership with school staff and non-disabled pupils, to prevent and respond to bullying. This included 'Anti-Bullying Committees; training teachers and pupils to understand disability' bullying and develop a positive understanding of disability; and taking on numerous different roles, such as peer mentors or bullying buddies.

'We would be the adults for the day, and tell the teachers what they should do better.'

Responding to bullying when it happens

Disabled children and young people suggested numerous ways in which bullying could be more effectively responded to when it happens.

- *Peer-centred responses*

Child: *'What we did in my primary school about bullying, we did this peer mediation thing, where there were 2 people, the bully 'n the one being picked on, 'n if they had like a fight, we would sit em down n let them decide what they thought they could do to sort it out.'*

Facilitator: *'Why do you think it worked so well?'*

Child: *'Because if you just tell em what to do, they often think that 'I don't wanna do that 'n it's unfair, whereas if they decide together, they can, like, form it as an agreement. I was a peer mediator 'n it was really good n if there was like a lot of 'em fighting I would take some 'n my partner would take the other 'n let them decide 'cos if you forced them to do something it might just aggravate em n it'd carry things on.'*

Disabled children identified peer mentoring and peer mediation as two key methods of responding to bullying. They felt that peer mentoring could provide them with the support they needed when bullying occurred and were also keen to act as peer mentors to other pupils, to enable them to raise awareness of the issues faced by disabled pupils and to share their personal experiences for the benefit of others.

Peer mediation was regularly cited as a valued way to enable pupils to deal with bullying incidents. With the right training and support, disabled pupils felt able and strongly valued being able to support other pupils to resolve issues. In addition, they felt that by being able to have support from their peers, to talk to the child who has bullied, they were more likely to be able to reach a shared agreement; understand and value each other; and develop a friendship as a result.

- *Safe places to go*

Many disabled children and young people spoke about the need to know they have safe places to go to when bullying occurs. These included areas of the school where supervised activities took place during break times that they could choose to go to. Even the awareness of knowing these safe places existed gave young people reassurance, whether they decided to use them or not.

In addition, they wanted to know where to go and who they could talk to as and when bullying occurred. This could be somewhere they could talk to fellow pupils or school staff.

What did children with SEN and/or disabilities say they needed from schools?

1. To know they would be listened to and have a safe place to talk about the incident - in some schools, children spoke positively about their school having an 'open door policy'. They had developed positive, supportive relationships with the school staff and knew that they could, at any time, approach a member of staff and be given the time to talk that they needed.
2. To be believed – in addition to knowing they would be listened to, children and young people need to know they will be believed and given the time and space they need to explore their feelings about the bullying incident. Some children said that sometimes, even though something had upset them, they might not know if this was classed as bullying. Further, they might not know how to resolve this with the other pupil, and they felt they needed to be able to have the space to talk this through with a member of staff.
3. Support for all involved - disabled children and young people spoke very maturely about the need for support for both the child who has been bullied and the child who has bullied. They understood that often, children who bully may have problems themselves and need support to understand what they have done to enable them to try and change their behaviour. In addition, as previously mentioned, disabled children sometimes felt that sanction-based approaches worsen, rather than rectify, situations. They therefore felt that supporting the child who has bullied to understand their behaviour and its consequences was potentially effective in the first instance.
4. Supporting children to develop friendships - many disabled children spoke of high levels of exclusion and isolation within their peer groups and felt that support to develop and sustain friendships would prevent bullying from reoccurring. Some children spoke of 'Bully Buddies' – children who buddy up with another child to prevent them from feeling isolated and excluded and who would support them to develop a friendship group, their confidence and self-esteem.
5. Support to understand their own behaviour - many disabled children and young people spoke of how sometimes they didn't understand that their own behaviour could be perceived as bullying by other children and young people. They wanted

support from school staff to learn about and understand how their behaviour impacted on others and to learn how this could be perceived by others.

In fact, children and young people with behavioural difficulties resulting from an impairment, and whose behaviour could be perceived as bullying by others, were very self-aware about how their behaviour could impact on other children. They wanted to be involved in helping other children learn about *their* behaviour and that this resulted from their impairment, rather than necessarily being intentional.

'Can't help it, sometimes don't know its wrong like.'

6. Appropriate, individualised intervention from teachers - when reporting bullying, disabled children and young people want time to talk with school staff and to agree in partnership the appropriate response to this. Many children said they just wanted to know they could talk to someone and learn how to challenge this themselves in the initial stages rather than fearing that if they told a sanction for the child who has bullied would be automatically incurred.

For example, some children told us that when they have reported a incident of bullying a teacher or TA checks in with them every day by discreetly giving them a 'thumbs up' sign. If the child responds with a 'thumbs up' – everything is OK. If they give a 'thumbs down', then the teacher makes sure that they have time later on to talk through what has happened. This reassured children that someone was there for them, they weren't isolated in dealing with bullying, and that they were in control of the situation and the responses being made.

'Thumbs up, means things've been good, thumbs down mean it has been bad.'

Children also valued support from school staff to mediate. This enabled them to talk in a safe environment about the bullying incident, learn to understand each other, and agree an effective solution.

"She called me a cripple. I told my mum and she spoke to the school. They sat us down together and we could talk about it. I think it helped her to understand why I got upset"

7. Supervision and support: Many disabled children valued having supervision outside of lessons. This reassured them - knowing there was someone there to turn to if bullying occurred - and they felt this deterred other students from bullying them.

'...they'd keep an eye on everything... to make sure we don't get bullied.'

8. Developing an awareness of bullying - disabled children and young people wanted support to develop their own understandings of bullying: to know this is wrong; that they have a right to challenge it; and the confidence to be able to challenge or report bullying when it occurs. Disabled children reported being told to learn to live with bullying and some had been advised that, due to being disabled, bullying was to be expected.
9. Relationships with school staff – positive relationships with school staff based on trust was a key feature of most of the suggestions made by disabled children and young people. They needed to know staff would listen, believe them and that they could have time to talk when they needed it. Where staff didn't listen, this prevented disabled children from reporting bullying.

'She's the only one that understands us and what we're saying. All the other teachers think we're messing about or joking about or lying to them. She knows us... she knows us pretty well, and knows we're not lying.'

Council for Disabled Children for the Anti-Bullying Alliance 2010

www.ncb.org.uk/cdc

With thanks to all the children and young people who took part and so willingly offered their views and shared their experiences.