

## **Bullying of children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs in schools: briefing paper for schools on the views and experiences of parents, carers and families**

### **Introduction**

This briefing forms part of the suite of briefings for school leaders, teachers and policy makers emerging from the current (2010/11) work of the Anti-Bullying Alliance on the issue of the bullying of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities in schools.

This briefing is based on the results of an online survey, completed by around 80 parents and carers of disabled children. It is supported by the knowledge and materials of Contact a Family's work with families with disabled children. The briefing highlights some of the key themes raised by families with disabled children, and some of the ways they feel bullying could be dealt with when it occurs in and around the school environment.

### **Impact of caring for a disabled child on family life**

Having a disabled child can have a huge impact on family life. Parent carers face a unique combination of emotional, social, physical and financial pressures that impact on family life. Without support, families find it difficult to take part in normal daily activities and can become very isolated and feel unable to cope. This can affect the well being of the whole family.

Parents have identified the following as causing strain on their family:

- struggling to come to terms with the news of a child's disability; or professionals not acting on their concerns about their child's development
- feelings of isolation
- their own poor health caused by caring responsibilities
- a lack of suitable services; and having to fight for those that are available.
- a lack of time for themselves and each other
- a lack of support and understanding from professionals and the wider family network and community
- little opportunity to enjoy play and leisure as a family
- problems balancing work and caring (lack of childcare, flexible working, hostility from colleague etc)
- increased financial worries due to the additional and ongoing costs of raising a disabled child.

Therefore, the stress of having to deal with bullying of a child at school can be considerable, and how well or badly it is dealt with can have a massive impact on the rest of family life.

*“It is hard to express just how awful the whole situation was and the problems that it still brings us – five years on.”*

Parents who responded to the survey said how glad they were to take part and that the bullying of children with disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs was being looked at.

### **Key themes from the survey results**

During January to April 2011, we ran an online survey, asking parents and families with disabled children about their experiences of bullying at school and how it was dealt with if it had occurred. Families did not have to disclose where their child went to school or whether they attended a mainstream or special school. The families reported a wide variety of experiences but many expressed an overwhelming sense of anger, even many years after the bullying had occurred.

The respondents were families of children with a disability and/or with Special Educational Needs. 35% of respondents had a child with Special Educational Needs and 62% had a child with a disability, with 3% having both. 3% of respondents identified their child as having ASD or ADHD.

The vast majority of responses (96%) were from parents whose child had been bullied at school. Only 3% had not and 1% said they didn't know.

### **Bullying behaviours**

The Anti-Bullying Alliance defines bullying as “people doing nasty or unkind things to you on purpose, more than once, which is difficult to stop”. Bullying can take many forms, and the main ones are:

- Verbal: name calling, insulting, teasing
- Emotional: spreading rumours, deliberately ignored or excluded and talking and laughing behind others back, turning friends against them, taking, hiding or damaging their things, writing or drawing things
- Physical: physical contact that would hurt someone, such as pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking
- Sexual: touching that is not wanted, saying unkind things about who people like, because of being a girl or boy
- Racial: using unkind words or actions because of someone's colour, culture, origin, nationality

The most common form of bullying experienced was verbal (36%), followed by emotional (30%) and physical (28%) with 2% of respondents reporting either sexual or racial bullying. Other forms of bullying accounted for 3% of responses. These included being excluded from taking part, cyber bullying, stealing and damaging school materials and equipment, and parent led bullying.

Whilst this survey was looking at the effects of bullying in school, a number of the families reported that the bullying also occurred out of school, especially if the other children lived nearby. Parents also reported cyber bullying when they were at home.

Most of the bullying reported was done by children to children. However a small number of families reported bullying by other parents, or by teachers:

*“Our son has been... ridiculed, humiliated in front of peers, treated differently, punished for incidents that is not proportional to the incident that has occurred, physically threatened and isolated by teachers.”*

Although this was only reported by a small number of families, it is very alarming and more detailed research is needed on this topic.

### **Difference and disability**

Nearly all respondents (85%) believed this bullying was because their child had disabilities or Special Educational Needs.

*“My daughter had people brush her ‘germs’ off each time she touched them or brushed past them and her friends were told she was contagious. She was also ridiculed by others as she changed as she struggles to dress.”*

*“His poor coordination gave bullies something to target.”*

When asked why they believed this was, many families said it was because their child was different:

*“Because my child is different from the other children in her school.”*

*“He is vulnerable, non verbal and not able to report an issue.”*

*“Because he can’t get away fast as he is in a wheelchair.”*

*“The bullies expressly said this is why they were treating him in the way they were.”*

*“He sees everyone as his friend, even when people are hitting him.”*

*“The parents of the two children concerned told the school they objected to the presence of an autistic child in their children’s class.”*

### **Identifying the bullying**

Parents became aware of the bullying in many different ways, and sometimes through different channels at different times. For just over half (51%) of respondents, parents were told directly about the bullying by their child. Other methods included the parent witnessing it happening (9%), a school staff member told them (9%), the parent seeing the effects or consequences of the bullying (7%), another pupil told them (7%), a sibling told them (6%), another parent told them (6%) a teacher told them (4%), or it was reported by CAMHS (1%). Only 13% of families report being

told about the bullying by school staff or teachers, and so raises questions about how school bullying is identified and monitored.

### **Effects of bullying on disabled children and young people**

Parents reported that the effects of the disabled bullying have been wide reaching and very damaging for the children and young people. The consequences of the bullying often lasted far longer than the bullying itself.

*“He was bullied unmercifully throughout primary school which resulted in his being verbally aggressive and occasionally physically violent. It destroyed his self-esteem and resulted in self-harming.”*

*“He used to come home so upset but couldn’t explain to me what was going on. It took days for him to tell me.”*

*“He would often come home from school moody and unable to express what happened.”*

*“My daughter has had to go to A&E due to injuries she received at school.”*

Some disabled children retaliated against the bullying and so accusations of bullying were made against them, or they were excluded:

*“Tendency to disbelieve or victim blame. Found it important to tell them [the school] regardless otherwise he would have been seen as the trouble maker when he reacted/retaliated.”*

*“Not one child suffered an exclusion for a physical assault but my son did when he assaulted another child after much provocation.”*

*“They said it was a 2 way thing.”*

### **Reporting bullying when it happens**

Nearly all of the parents (99%) reported the bullying to the school. The remaining 1% did not because it had already been done so by another student. The person it was most commonly reported to was the Head teacher (33%), followed by the Class teacher (26%), SENCO (19%), Form tutor (10%) and school nurse (1%), and other sources (12%). These included School Governors, Parish Priests, Head of Year and Children’s Services Coordinator. In 6% of cases, the bullying was reported to a number of different sources, usually because it was felt that the situation had been ignored or not dealt with by the people they had originally reported it to. Some parents said they had reported it to as many as 5 official sources.

### **Responding to the allegations of bullying**

Schools reacted in a variety of ways once the allegation of bullying had been made. Families reported a wide range of reactions and responses. Some were good and positive, and others were poor and unhelpful.

## Positive responses

22% of families felt that the response of the school had been effective and highlighted the following actions as thought were positive or helpful:

- **Dealing with the individuals concerned**

*"The Head spoke to the pupil's concerned."*

*"Spoke to the bully and explained about it not being nice bullying another child."*

*"Moved the bully to into a different class"*

*"They were named and shamed."*

- **Educating the school or class**

*"They did an education session with the rest of the class on autism to increase awareness and make sure everyone was aware of appropriate behaviour."*

*"They invited an expert into the school to better understand my son's conditions and how to minimise his reactions."*

*"They read a story about a child in a wheelchair, placed a poster outside the class of a child in a wheelchair and gave the children the opportunity to help my son and become part of his routine."*

- **Setting up a range of support mechanisms**

*"They involved inclusion support staff to set up a circle of friends to ensure he has safe friends who he could trust and who would not stand by while this was happening."*

*"Put a buddying system in place so she was accompanied from lesson to lesson and she was given access at any time to the learning support base."*

*"Shadowed my son to ensure it was not continuing to take place."*

*"Gave my son an exit card to show when he is stressed in class."*

- **Involved the parents and professionals**

*"The teacher has been very supportive and is totally aware of the situation and keeps me updated."*

*"The school held a meeting between us, the class teacher, the school counsellor, and a psychologist to discuss ideas to help my son."*

*"They involved the child's mother. She approached me to apologise and told me that the boy would be punished at home by having no treats, TV or computer time for a week."*

## Negative responses

However, 68% of families said that the responses had not been effective, and were often negative or unhelpful. They identified the following responses as being particularly damaging:

- **Not being believed** was a recurring theme for many families, and one that they found particularly upsetting:

*“At first denied it, then admitted it was happening, but did nothing about it.”*

*“They wouldn’t believe us or our boys and insisted they don’t have bullying in their school.”*

*“The primary school at which my son used to go were at first quite dismissive. This was until my son tried to hang himself at the age of 11. They then started to take a bit more notice.”*

*“They said he had to get used to it as all children would be called names.”*

*“They refused to believe us, claimed we were lying and subsequently excluded our son due to his reaction to being bullied.”*

- **Doing nothing:** a significant number of parents reported that the school did nothing at all. This may be true or may be that the school did not communicate any action they had taken. Either way, it results in great unhappiness and frustration for the families concerned.
- **Penalising the bullied child:** some parents said that the response felt like it was punishing the bullied child, not the bullies:

*“Their solution was to keep him in a break times and lunchtimes so he was not exposed to the other children.”*

- **Parents made to feel as though they are making a fuss:** Some parents were made to feel like they were causing trouble for reporting the instances of bullying: *“Very quickly we felt we were becoming a nuisance. ‘What’s the problem this time?’ was a comment from a teacher on a few occasions... Some instances necessitated the need for the involvement of the police. We became so desperate after our last meeting with the Head, he admitted that he couldn’t guarantee our son’s safety whilst at school!”*

### **Resolving the situation**

As a result, 68% of parents said that they didn’t think the school’s response was effective and appropriate, 22% of parents thought it was and 10% did not know. This left many families feeling angry, frustrated, powerless or unsupported.

*“Totally ineffective and we were made to feel the onus was on us and not for the school to deal with.”*

*“Why should a child with disabilities not be allowed to go outside during free time because the school cannot control the actions of the other children?”*

*“Brushed it under the carpet.”*

*“Defensive and unhelpful.”*

*“My son will now not go to school staff when there’s a problem as he says there’s no point as they never believe him and nothing gets sorted.”*

*“Bullying got worse but turned from physical bullying to emotional bullying.”*

Many parents (55%) were very unhappy with how the situation had been dealt with. Only 17 % were happy with it, and a further 28% didn’t know.

*“We are happy for now but always waiting for the next thing.”*

*“It wasn’t resolved but did form part of our legal case to have him placed elsewhere.”*

*“Matter hasn’t been resolved yet and is ongoing.”*

*“it is still on-going, the bullying continues...”*

*“Made my son feel more worthless.”*

Many parents were so unhappy with how the situation had been dealt with that they took their child out of school as result. Some moved to a mainstream school and some to a special school.

*“Nothing was achieved and luckily my daughter was moved out of county to a specialised school for her.”*

*“Not great, as my son no longer attends mainstream education.”*

*“I tried everything – including calling in the exclusion/inclusion officer for the local children’s services partnership and complaining to the Governors. I ended up having to remove him from the school part way through year 6.”*

*“I moved my child to another school. There they act on bullying as soon as they are aware of it. The difference in my child was remarkable.”*

*“We took our child out of school in desperation and for his own well being.”*

The results of non effective action are felt by the whole family. Many siblings are affected, many parents report living under increased stress, and having their employment opportunities damaged:

*“I took my son out of school and contacted the county. Their response was slow and my child was out of school for a long period of time. He now attends a school for the recovery and rehabilitation of severely bullied children.”*

*“My son became progressively more damaged, became a minor bully himself and I nearly had a nervous breakdown.”*

*“We’ve ended up home schooling our son. I’ve had to give up my career and stay at home to look after him.”*

### What do parents say they want schools to do?

1. **Listen to the person reporting the bullying**, especially when it is the child and believe them. Disabled children must feel they can safely report when they are being bullied and that they will be listened to. The consequences of a child reporting bullying to an adult at home or at school and believing they are not listened to or believed are damaging and far reaching.
2. **Listen to the parents.** Parents are the experts in their child’s behaviour and disability and know when something is wrong. Parents are usually the first person who is told about the bullying, or who spots the signs of it. When they report it to the school, they want to be believed and listened to, not seen as causing trouble or being overly sensitive.
3. **Listen to both sides** and recognise that bullies often have their own problems. Parents know that many children deal with difficult situations, and that their bullying may be a consequence of this. They want all children to be listened to and supported.
4. **Good communication.** Parents believe that better communication would help to solve the distrust between parties, and to help all involved feeling as though they are working towards a solution, even when this takes time. This applies to all people involved, including between the parents and school staff, between pupils, between parents of the bullied and the bully.
5. **Respond quickly** once a concern has been raised. Many parents reported investigations that took many weeks or months to take place, during which the child may continue to be bullied, or be excluded from activities, and leaving the parents feeling as though nothing was being done. It is important that action or an investigation is seen to happen.

*“Listen and are very attentive at the time, but nothing constructive ever seems to come from it. No updates, no follow ups. Passed from one person to another”*

6. **Take action** against the bullies. Many parents reported that nothing had happened once they had raised a concern and expressed frustration that no actions were taken against those who had been bullying.

*“Investigated it, accepted it happened, apologised for it but at the same time allowed it continue”*

Parents suggested appropriate actions could include speaking to the individuals, getting them to acknowledge their actions and apologise, be moved into another class, or use warnings and exclusions within reason so that the bully knows they

cannot get away with it. Some actions may only need to occur once, and others may require longer term support.

7. **Active support techniques** to be offered to the child being for the bullied. Some suggestions include:
    - Circle of Friends: a structured programme with 6 to 8 volunteers who create a support network for the child, provide encouragement and recognition for progress made, work with them to identify any difficulties and devise and implement practical ideas to deal with difficulties.
    - A buddy scheme: someone who can act as a buddy, offering one to one support.
    - Providing a safe space to go to, especially when the child is distressed or in need some time alone. This could be during break time or lesson time.
    - A card to use in class to tell the teacher when they are upset or stressed, and likely to need some support or time-out, especially when they are unable to articulate that.
    - Support in corridors to ensure bad behaviour doesn't occur between classes.
  8. **Have a positive school wide ethos towards disability**, including all forms of disability. Actions could include running awareness sessions on different types and behaviours of disability with children, getting them to better understand how and why different people behave in different ways, study famous people who have had a disability or bringing in experts to talk to the school.
  9. **Be seen to actively discourage bullying** by running a range of school wide activities. These could include discussions in classes, holding question and answer sessions, studying bullying and its effects as a topic, or holding anti-bullying assemblies.
  10. **All teachers and staff to have training in disability awareness** and spotting the signs of bullying, as well as in techniques of how to manage the situation when it occurs and offering support to those involved.
  11. **Effective and well-publicised policies on dealing with bullying** that all children, staff and parents can sign up to. Make this part of the schools Code of Conduct and discipline and behaviour guidelines. Make all parents aware of these and to know what their opportunities for recourse is if they are not happy that they are being followed. Regularly monitor and review them, involving parents and children, including those with disabilities and Special Educational Needs, when they are reviewed.
  12. **Help for the parents and siblings** to cope with effects of the bullying. This could include better signposting to local and condition specific support groups or links to their parent carer forums.
  13. **Educate the wider community**, including other parents, so that they better understand disability and difference.
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For support on any of the issues raised, for more information about disability, conditions and Special Educational Needs, and the support available to parents and professionals, or to order a copy of *A guide to dealing with bullying: for parents with disabled children*, please get in touch with Contact a Family on 0808 808 3555 or go to [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

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