



## **Findings of the comprehensive review of the literature:**

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

#### **Briefing paper**

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#### **Background**

The Lamb Inquiry<sup>1</sup> (December 2009) recommended that Government should review the effectiveness of a range of approaches to preventing and tackling bullying of children with SEN and/or disabilities and invest further in those with the most impact<sup>2</sup>. A project was therefore launched early in 2010, led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance working with key organisations, to identify best practice in tackling SEN and/or disabilities-related bullying and to explore how schools can be supported to address it.

The aim of this project was to understand and then exemplify the most effective responses schools can make to preventing and responding to the bullying of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities.

The key audience for this is the schools' sector. As part of this project, a team at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education carried out a scoping study and a comprehensive review<sup>1</sup> of the available literature on this topic between February and July 2010 before wider consultations with an expert group took place in the late summer and autumn of 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?

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation 9, *Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence*, (DCSF, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.

- 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?
- 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 policy and practice.

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## **Briefing on 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 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. Staff are uncertain about how children with SEN and/or disabilities perceive bullying behaviour, for example, and tend to trust teacher ratings as opposed to self-reports (although the evidence indicates that adults generally underestimate the bullying and victimisation of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities). 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. In some schools, challenges remain in terms of the ways in which the issue of bullying and victimisation among children with SEN and/or disabilities is conceptualised (for example, working systematically on changing attitudes and recognising that the social context is crucial rather than focusing on dealing with certain 'problem children').

### ***Effective approaches that schools can take to prevention and response***

While research on interventions for pupils with SEN and/or disabilities has developed over recent years, there is a lack of research on this aspect of bullying and so more research on school-based interventions and their efficacy is needed. Accessing the views of young people with SEN and/or disabilities presents significant methodological challenges, for example, and more work is needed on this to enable schools to monitor instances of bullying that affect pupils with SEN and/or disabilities.

Simple targeted interventions can have considerable impact but need to focus on the particular needs of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities; the social meaning of bullying behaviour; and the experience of victimisation. Planned preventative interventions improve matters but schools also need to intervene reactively. It is clear that, where there are no interventions, bullying in mainstream settings can be worse than in special schools. There were many examples of generalised or small scale targeted interventions but not many specific whole school approaches.

Interventions fall into two main categories: those that aim to engage the empathy of peers through peer education and then to harness that empathy generally in support of students with SEN and/or disabilities; and those that engage in direct peer support. Peer support interventions show some success but need to be assisted by the classroom and school climate. There is a need to help schools to conceptualise bullying as located within the social context of the school and young people's lives.

## **Implications for future policy, practice, 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.

The literature suggests that the social context is of crucial importance. Pupils who are isolated from their peer group (for example, through separate teaching arrangements or by the constant presence of adult support) are at risk. Young people who have even the implicit support of sympathetic bystanders tend to be less vulnerable to bullying and victimisation. Having acquaintances in the peer group can afford protection, even if those peers cannot be defined as friends. More work therefore needs to be done on the development of peer support arrangements as a matter of policy – in special schools as well as in mainstream settings. It is likely that this will prove to be a fruitful avenue for the development of effective strategies for addressing the bullying and victimisation of children with SEN and/or disabilities, although there is not yet enough evidence to confirm the most effective approaches.

Direct work on language and communication skills also 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 even subtle 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 be encouraged to place language and communication at the centre of the curriculum where pupils have SEN and/or disabilities and more research should be undertaken into the role of peer interaction in the prevention of bullying and victimisation for these children.

The notion of dealing with difference in the social community of the school is an important arena for intervention and the development of approaches to bullying. Empathy building among peers (often through strategies that, in the past, might have been referred to as 'disability awareness' work) emerges from the literature as having the potential to reduce the bullying and victimisation of young people with SEN and/or disabilities. Reports of this kind of work include initiatives that focus on helping young people to 'understand classmates with autism' or 'support your friend with learning disabilities'. These initiatives may seem to run against the grain of some established inclusive practice that set out to downplay categories of SEN and/or disability and to emphasise the celebration of a culture of diversity in which 'we are all different'. Evidence from this literature review indicates a need to review policies of this kind and to look again at the value of highlighting particular forms of difference in order to promote empathy and understanding. Identifying difference in some young people in order to include them more effectively may present some schools with dilemmas in terms of policy and practice. However, it does seem that the strategy of identifying difficulties specifically in order to address them effectively needs to be re-examined and re-evaluated.