

Reducing the incidence and impact of bullying for children and young people with SEND

Young people's views on bullying and mental health

**"The bigger the problem,
the deeper you have to dig."**

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SEN and disabilities: developing effective anti-bullying practice: A programme of work, led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and funded by the Department for Education, to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying of children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities in schools.

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Introduction

During July and August 2013 we ran a series of discussion groups to explore the issues surrounding bullying and mental health. The discussion groups covered:

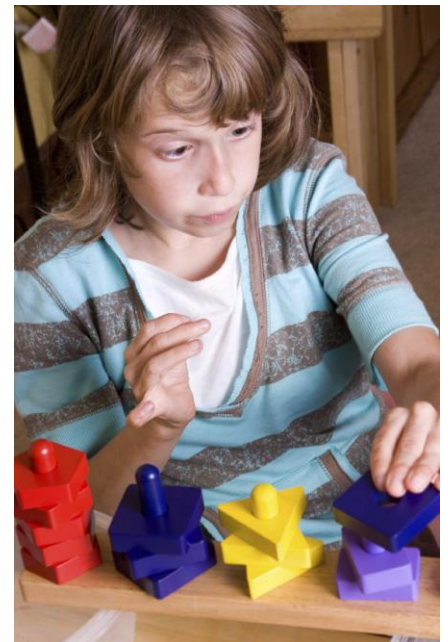
- Young people's experiences of bullying in schools, including:
 - Bullying directly related to young people's perceived or actual experience of mental health issues.
 - The impact of bullying (regardless of the perceived 'cause') on young people's mental health, emotional well-being and identity.
- What could be done in schools to reduce the incidence of bullying and its effects on young people's mental health and emotional well-being.
- What should be done to effectively support young people who have experienced bullying.

The young people who were involved in the discussion groups:

- 35 children and young people
- 6 discussion groups
- 25 were female and 10 male.
- Their ages ranged from 12 - 22 years old. (The majority were 12-17 years old.)
- 2 groups were held with young people who were currently, or had previously, used specialist CAMHs.
- 4 groups were in VCSO who provided youth advice and counselling services.

The young people had a variety of experiences related to bullying in schools including those that:

- Had witnessed bullying in schools of close friends or family members.
- Had experienced bullying related to their mental health issue.
- Had experienced bullying for a range of issues, (including for example sexuality, appearance, level of affluence, disability) which had affected their mental health.



- Had bullied other young people.
- Had bullied other young people and experienced bullying themselves (either at school or at home).

This report forms part of a programme of work led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and funded by the Department for Education to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying of children and young people special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in schools. A full guidance document on preventing bullying and children and young people with mental health issues accompanies this report.

To find out more please visit: <http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/1198>

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Young people's views and experiences of bullying and mental health in schools: Understanding the issues

Key messages from young people

- Bullying has a significant effect in children and young people's mental health, emotional well-being and identity.
- Many children and young people with mental health or emotional and behavioural difficulties, talked of receiving little or no support for their mental health support needs in school.
- Many young people said they do not feel able to talk about bullying or how it affects their emotional well-being.
- Schools often don't see behind young people's behaviour. This is often seen as disruptive, rather than an expression of difficulties or distress.
- There is often little or no recognition or support for the emotional needs of children and young people who are bullied.
- There is often little or no recognition or support for the mental health or emotional needs of children and young people who bully others.
- Bullying which is not responded to effectively, can cause children and young people to develop other coping strategies such as self isolation or self harm.
- Bullying which is not responded to effectively can cause significant disruption to children and young people's ability to engage with school, learning and their wider relationships.
- Many young people felt that bullying by teachers is often not acknowledged or believed.
- There is a lack of teaching and learning about bullying or mental health and emotional well-being.

Young people's views on why bullying happens

"For young people who are already quite vulnerable, other people identify them as a target and it kind of makes the 'vulnerableness' worse."

"Single someone out. Because they're different."

"If you self harm or have, like, an eating disorder, and your peers know about it, then they see you differently. It can make you a target."

Young people identified a range of reasons for bullying. The defining feature of their explanations was that it was related to some form of 'difference' or perceived 'weakness' that affected a young person's social status or made them 'stand out.' This included:

- Being disabled, having learning difficulties or long term health conditions. Including young people who had emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Social choices (such as hanging around in different social groups or dress sense)
- Actual or perceived level of affluence
- Actual or perceived mental health or emotional difficulties.
- Religion.
- Sexuality.
- Gender and gender identity.



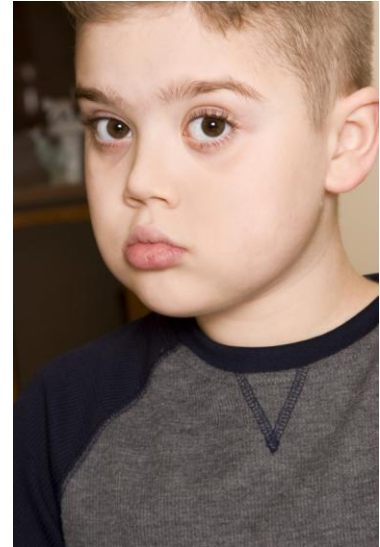
Young people felt that whatever the reason they had been bullied, that it was often related to other people's perception of what would 'get to' them the most.

"They [young people who bully others] always pick on what you're most insecure about, like I was really insecure about my weight and that, so they'd always call me fat. Or they'd do things to my friend in front of me, because they know I'm protective of her and I'd stick up for her. Teachers then said I was the one bullying my friend and the other girl. They said I was bullying the girl who was bullying me! In the end I was the one who got shouted at, told I was wrong."

Types of bullying experienced by young people

Young people talked of experiencing or witnessing the full range of common bullying behaviours. The issues that young people spoke about most frequently, or felt were the biggest issues in schools, included:

- **Derogatory language about mental health and emotional well-being** and, for example, the common and often unchallenged use of derogatory terms such as mental or crazy. This included language directed at individuals who were seen to be different (regardless whether they had mental health issues or not) and the regular, unchallenged use of such language, which affected how young people felt about talking about bullying or mental health.
- Sustained, prolonged bullying focussing on a particular **aspect of someone's identity**, which was often unrecognised or unchallenged, and had significant effect on their mental health and identity.
- **Physical abuse.**



“Eggs thrown at me, someone trying to set my hair alight, things thrown at me, took my lunch money, said hurtful things but also hitting, which turned into fights”

- **Peer pressure** and being pressured into doing things they didn't want to do, for the desire to 'fit in' or in the hope that this would prevent them being bullied. This included young people feeling pressured into bullying other young people, to protect themselves from the same treatment.

“Peer pressure can sort of, it's not exactly bullying, but you pressure someone into doing something that they don't really wanna do. So they feel like they have to do it to fit in. You can't really say no, because you feel like a fool.”

- Young people reported high levels of **isolation and exclusion**, within 'friendship' groups. They felt this was less overt and harder for them and others to identify as bullying, as from the outside it looked like friendship. Young people were also reluctant to admit this was bullying, as the promise of friendship and to be part of a group, help strong sway.

“In films and stuff it's like one on one in the corridor, but like these days, it's more like groups and you feel like everyone is surrounding you and stuff, which makes it harder to spot, because if it was one to one and you saw them ... but in a

group, they do it in a way that a teacher can't see. Looks like friendship from the outside."

- Young people who were isolated, who were having mental health or emotional difficulties or who felt at risk of bullying themselves spoke of bullying others to **enhance their social standing or to prevent that person from bullying them.**

"Uncomfortable thing is that bullying can be fun. It can be a reward, it can be enjoyable. No one really talks about that people can get a kick out of it. Need to think why this happens, why people think they need to feel superior. A lot is about self preservation. Even if you're just laughing along, you can see someone getting it worse than you."

- Young people spoke of the significant impact **cyberbullying** had on the severity of the bullying they experienced; that the face to face bullying followed them outside of school and into their homes; that it increased the number of young people involved in bullying; and that it made bullying more persistent and sustained.
- **Disclosing and gossiping** about someone's difficulties: Many young people spoke of confiding in a friend about mental health, emotional difficulties or other problems they were experiencing, only for this confidence to be broken and for this to be spread around the school. This not only affected the individual concerned, but also led to other young people being fearful of talking about their mental health or emotional difficulties.

Where and when bullying happens

Young people talked of being bullied:

- In school, particularly in places where there is little or no supervision, where young people can be isolated.
- In lessons, both by other children and young people, and by teachers.
- In the home, by parents, carers or siblings, with this affecting their behaviour or well-being in school.
- On the journeys too and from school.
- Online. If young people were also being cyberbullied, the bullying effectively followed them wherever they went.

“You used to be able to go in to school, get your head down, and have different friends outside of school. You could separate it. Now you can’t.”

Young people felt there was a particular lack of understanding of the effect that bullying happening outside of school has on their mental health and emotional well-being, and thus, their behaviour or ability to engage well in school.

The impact of bullying on children and young people

“Wears down their confidence, their self-esteem, until they’re quite depressed, low. And also it leaves them feeling very isolated. Which is why people don’t reach out for help with bullying.”

The young people we spoke to talked of bullying affecting their mental health, emotional well-being and identity. This was particularly so when it was not responded to effectively and became persistent, or where they were not given support to address the emotional effects of bullying. Young people spoke of the double impact when bullying affects your mental health or when you are bullied because you have a mental health issue: you’re scared to talk about the bullying and you’re scared of talking about how you’re feeling. Young people spoke of bullying:

- Leading to suicide ideation.
- Severely damaging their confidence and self esteem.
- Causing them to feel paranoid, constantly on guard or unable to trust.
- Leading to developing (or worsening) mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders.

“Sometimes can cause mental health issues. I got told I was fat so I stopped eating for ages. I self harmed.”

- Leading them to develop a negative self identity, particularly where a particular aspect of their identity was targeted. Where young people spoke of being bullied because they were disabled, had a mental health issue, for an aspect of their body image or due to their sexuality, for example, they developed negative self-perceptions about this element of their identity and felt it was ‘something wrong with them’. Many young people talked of this causing them to hate this part of themselves or conceal this part of their identity, which then in itself caused additional mental health and emotional difficulties.

“I got bullied for being gay. I told a teacher I trusted and they just said it was a phase I was going through. As if it being a

phase made the bullying OK, or any less bad. They didn't do anything about it. They treated it like it was nothing. It really affected me and how I felt about being gay. I thought it must be something bad."

Where bullying was not effectively responded to; where young people were not given appropriate support to deal with the effects of bullying; or where they were not given support with their mental health, they talked of having to find (often unhealthy and detrimental) coping mechanisms. These included:

- **Self Isolation and exclusion:** This included isolation within the school environment, as well as from school itself.

"All the way through year 10 and 11, I ate my lunch in the toilet."

"Not get involved. Prefer to sit out. Don't do nothing."

"The head teacher from my school, my mum saw him 5 times before he did 'owt. I just left school. Truantiing was better than being there."

- **Self harm:** Many young people talked of self-harm as a coping mechanism and a way of regaining a sense of control. However, they also felt there was often a lack of understanding about self-harm or appropriate responses when they talked about it.

"I know a lot of people who self harm and all the teachers say 'stop doing it for attention. It's like, great."

"Start hurting themselves."

- **Drugs and alcohol**

"Drugs and drink."

"I turned to drink."

"The government wonders why a lot of young people turn to drink? The government has a go at the youngsters because they're drinking and doing drugs but they don't see what's causing it."

Bullying also had a negative impact on young people's ability to engage with school, learning and their relationships:

- **Keeping it all bottled up:** Young people talked about how adept they became at pretending everything was OK on the outside and the effects of

containing all of their emotions. This affected their ability to concentrate in school or on the way they behaved. They often struggled to deal with their emotions and could then take this out on others. Young people spoke of this causing significant disruption to their school life: they struggled to engage or concentrate in lessons, or some become angry and disruptive. This behaviour often led to them being labelled as 'the disruptive one' or 'the troublemaker' rather than being understood as the impact of bullying or emotional distress. This also significantly affected young people's relationships with their parents and family.

"Take it out on your family. Got to come out somewhere."

"Put on a fixed smile to make other people happy."

"[After I had talked about the bullying and nothing happened] I started to get really angry. They [teachers] hadn't listened. Made me feel I couldn't talk to anyone. I started to get really angry and taking it out on my [family] at home, because no one had listened to me."

"Pretend in front of everyone of else that you haven't heard it, but you have heard it. You have taken it to heart. Like some people can just shrug things off, but sometimes other people can't and they hide it."

- **Disruption to education:** Several young people had changed schools to escape bullying, with some changing schools multiple times or avoiding school altogether.
- **'Learning that no one listens':** Where young people had tried to talk about bullying, but had not been believed or listened to, has led them to:
 - Believe that no one listens and not to speak up about other issues in future.
 - Believe they are not worth listening to or "not important enough for people to do anything about it."
 - Find other coping mechanisms, as outlined earlier.
 - Feel isolated, alone and unsupported.



“When I finally wanted to tell my mum and she went in [to the school] the teachers said, ‘oh don’t be daft, we’d have noticed it.’ But whoever’s doing it, is doing it slyly, like they’re mates with you and then do it when no one’s looking.”

“They don’t believe us because we’re young. As if we don’t know how we feel or our feelings are less, just because we’re young. What, we only get feelings when we’re 18?”

“Makes you feel like no one is there for you. Considering they’re supposed to be authority figures, people to look up to. But if they don’t listen to you, makes you feel alone. Isolated.”

Young people also talked of bullying having long term effects, including:

- Ongoing difficulty in forming trusting, healthy relationships and friendships.

“[After being bullied at school] I went to college and really struggled to make friends because I didn’t trust anyone. Still today I have relationship difficulties.”

- Long term effects on their mental health and emotional well-being.

“Makes you angry. It was XX years ago now but I still look back and think I’m stupid for not sticking up for myself more.”

“Scars you for life.”

“Still having psychotherapy for it.”

- Making them likely to stay in abusive relationships, as they had become used to being treated a certain way.

Lack of understanding about mental health and emotional well-being in schools

“The problem is not being able to talk about the problem.”

Young people felt that there was a poor understanding of mental health or emotional well-being within schools and that there was a lack of teaching or awareness about mental health and emotional well-being. This affected their ability to talk about their mental health or to seek support.

“We had personal development sessions but relationships weren’t covered. Mental health wasn’t covered. Just about jobs, uni. Should be compulsory.”

“I think for some people it’s quite hard to believe young people have mental health problems. They assume it’s mainly adults. When they think of someone with mental health they normally assume it’s an adult. People don’t realise it can start early.”

“Stress, anxiety. I mean very basic stuff. Nothing is being done.”

“Someone could be walking around, really depressed, not really talking to anyone but people might just think they’re stuck up.”

This meant that many young people:

- Were unsure where to go for help or support in school for their mental health or emotional well-being.
- Were worried about being open about mental health issues and usually kept this concealed from friends, other students and teachers.
- Were worried that talking about their problems would lead to bullying, due the stigma surrounding mental health.

“People don’t discuss it.”

“My friend found out about a problem I had and then she told everyone else in school.”

“Like you don’t really talk about it because they might, like they would bully you about it.”

“If they knew your [mental health] problem, they would talk about it a lot.”

Where support was available, young people often said they wouldn’t access it, as it was not private or discrete enough. This made them worry people would find out and could then cause them to be bullied, or they were unsure who would be informed that they had accessed the support.

“Trouble is you’re going to a room, everyone know what’s there. It could be a school counsellor or mentor, but you tell them you’re being bullied and they’re going to inform your parents.”

Where young people did seek help and support for their mental health issues, they often reported poor responses and a lack of understanding from the people they had confided in. For example, some young people spoke to telling someone in school that they were self harming and being told ‘to stop attention seeking.’

Young people felt the combination of the above issues increased the stigma surrounding mental health as well as prevented them from feeling able to be open about their mental health issues, or access help and support.

Focus on educational attainment

As well as a general lack of understanding of or proactive approaches to supporting mental health and emotional well-being in schools, young people felt that schools often placed more importance on performance and educational attainment than young people's well-being. This made them feel pressured to perform, which often contributing to their already difficult feelings, and prevented them from feeling able to seek support if they were struggling.

"Finding out what's wrong is not so important" [as grades]

Identifying bullying and understanding children and young people's behaviour

"The bigger the problem, the deeper you have to dig."

Young people understood that bullying could be difficult to identify for teachers and school staff, but felt that teachers needed to be more aware and alert to the possibility that bullying is happening and the impact this could have on young people's mental health.

"I think it's just not seen but it's not hard to see, like, I just think they're not thinking about bullying. Like maybe they haven't been bullied themselves, so they don't think it's gonna happen."

"Sometimes bullying is invisible or when it does happen, not everyone is aware of it."

"Yeh like, sometimes it doesn't happen obviously, like it happens in a conversation, so it doesn't happen obviously."

"In one school we just said it, got things out in the open, then it was over. So it wasn't really bullying. It got sorted. People got it out. But when I moved to another school, it was really hidden, quiet. You couldn't do much about that."

They felt teachers often didn't pick up on changes in children and young people's behaviour or understand the signs of bullying or mental health issues.

"People don't pick up on it."

"Teachers need to pick up on that [isolation and vulnerability] and take an active role in asking, rather than waiting to be told. I think

especially with young people with mental health, I think a lot are less likely to come forward and say 'I'm being bullied' and say this is what's happening to me. Teachers need to be on the look out. To intervene."

"People think if you go to class everyday and you're turning up and you seem happy, you know, you're doing normal things and going through the motions, then they think there's nothing wrong with you and there's nothing you need."

"Sometimes they have to look deeper than ... than what it is. Because sometimes people hide things to try and fit in, so they [teachers] wouldn't see that they were struggling or whatever. Like if someone said a nasty comment and the person who was struggling just shrugged it off, because they wanted to just fit in and pretend that it's all alright, then people, it would be more helpful, like, if people could see behind that. Like maybe see that it is a rude comment or that they might take it to heart."



Young people often felt certain forms of behaviour were misunderstood as a young person being disruptive or challenging, rather than questioning the causes of their behaviour. This was particularly so for young people with identified mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties, who felt assumptions were made that their behaviour was due to their impairment or mental health issue, rather than bullying or other problems they may be experiencing.

"People just assume it's because they have ADHD. Expect it, rather than thinking something may be going on for them."

Children and young people who bully others

Several children and young people talked about times they had bullied other children and young people. At times this was due to good intentions to protect others or a lack of understanding about the impact of their actions. Young people wanted support to understand the impact of their actions and felt this also showed people cared about them.

"My best friend was being bullied. I stood up for her but it kinda turned into me bullying her [the person bullying her friend]. My mum told me what I was doing wasn't right, so I stopped, so I stopped bullying her."

“If no one cares about you [by helping you to understand your actions], how does that make you learn how to behave?”

Other children and young people felt bullying could happen as an expression of a young person’s own distress or unmet mental health issues. They felt this was often unrecognised and little attention or support was given to address the mental health or emotional well-being of the young person who had bullied.

“There was so much going on in my life, that sometimes the only way to feel strong or powerful was to bully other people.”

At other times, young people with mental health issues spoke of the need to bully others as a form of self preservation or to feel included if they felt isolated.

“You feel part of something and accepted. Them not me.”

Young people also spoke of bullying as a direct consequence of certain impairments, which affected their behaviour.

“Until I was XX years old I was being bullied. Then I had a head injury and I turned into a bully.”

Lack of awareness about bullying or clear strategies to respond to bullying when it happens

Young people often talked of bullying being invisible within schools. It was not discussed as an issue and there were no clear approaches or strategies for dealing with bullying.

“Schools are in denial. They don’t admit bullying is a problem, so nothing is done about it. Stops you being open about it. Keeps it hidden.”

“The only true story we had in school was about a girl who killed herself because she was being bullied. And they showed us the letters and she took an overdose and it showed all her writing deteriorating. That was the only mention of bullying.”

“I went to this person at school, trying for help with my issues and she didn’t know what to do. She just went like ‘oh do whatever.’ She didn’t know what to do. She said just try and get on with it.”

Talking about bullying

Young people spoke of several issues which affected their ability or willingness or talk about bullying. These included fear that telling would make the bullying worse and worsen their already vulnerable social position in school.

"It's all played out on this big stage, so you're like 'everyone will know I've gone and told, everyone will think I'm a snitch.' I'm going to get picked on more."

"It's embarrassing, going to admit you're being picked on. You're self conscious enough already. You feel like enough of a fucking victim and then you've got to go and admit it to someone."

The fear or experience of not being believed or taken seriously also prevented young people from talking about bullying. They felt this was compounded by a lack of understanding of or assumptions about mental health issues.

"I think one of the worst things with teachers is assuming it's a phase. Everyone assumes. They've assumed they're just going through a phase, the person with mental health. That's a big one I've noticed in schools."

"You get the courage to go and tell a teacher and they just tell you it's just bickering and to just shrug it off and just tell you to go and be mates again. Makes you scared of what the other people are gonna do to you. Of what will happen to you. Makes you feel like they don't really care. Like they say, 'oh don't be so stupid.'"

Young people said they often did not know where to go to talk about bullying or mental health issues. Where support was available, they were often unsure how private this would be, how support could help and were worried this would make the bullying worse.

"YP 1: You could go and talk to the pastoral staff

YP 2: Yeh, but they tend to be [expletive]. They just don't know what they're doing. And they're definitely not trained in mental health. Like, they're trained in ADHD and stuff like that. But mental health, emotional issues, they're like, 'don't talk to me about that.'"

"We had a counsellor [at school], but if you went to the counsellor then everyone would think you're a nutter and then you'd get bullied."

"Help isn't discrete enough."

"You don't think it's gonna work. I don't think counselling works. It won't stop things."

Bullying and retaliation

A lack of effective responses to bullying meant children and young people were often driven to retaliation out of frustration or saw this as the only way of dealing with the bullying. This often resulted in the person who retaliated being the one that got into trouble.

"I would have turned my back on `em and if I'd got really annoyed I would have hit `em."

Young person: "A big fight normally helps. Gets it out in the open. If people see a big fight then they don't pick on you as much."

Facilitator: "Are there other ways you can think of that could stop bullying happening?"

Young person: "I don't think there are any other ways. The only way to stop bullies is to do it back."

"Fight back. Say something back. Don't let them get away with"

"I regret hitting back. I'm not that kind of person, but I had to protect myself. No one did anything. 'Oh they're only playing around?' They don't know the damage it can do."

The role of teachers in bullying

Young people talked of the role of teachers in bullying. Young people with mental health, emotional, behavioural or learning difficulties talked of teachers low expectations of their ability or their behaviour, which affected their self esteem, behaviour and how they were perceived by others in the school.

"Being told I can't do things."

"Always told I'm useless in class."

"In English he [teacher] gave me crossword to do. The whole class used to write and I had a crossword put in front of me. He didn't think I could do the work, so he just gave me a crossword."

Several young people talked of being bullied by teachers. This included consistently being singled out in class and 'made an example of,' being labelled as the 'disruptive' one, and teachers making jokes at their expense. They felt this gave other children and young people 'free reign' to bully them. Young people felt this was exacerbated by a lack of support for or understanding of their mental health or emotional health needs. They felt their behaviour was often misinterpreted as challenging or disruptive, when instead they were struggling with their mental health or emotional well-being.

“Teachers can sometimes be the bullies. One teacher, she was always picking me up on this one thing. Always telling me I’m not good enough. It was like she was always picking on me. Every time. Every class.”

“I fancied a boy. We weren’t like really obvious about. I was just, like, a kid. And in front of everyone, in front of the whole class, he [the teacher] made me go and sit next to him and then he [the teacher] did that [makes an embracing action].”

“Teachers can hurt you more than the students can.”

“Teachers don’t understand. They can say something and they can think they’re having a joke and a laugh with you, but they’re not. Little things they can say like, they’re trying to be a cool teacher and get in with the students, and they can say something and think it’s funny, but to that student it’s not. They do it to be a cool teacher. They hurt a student to look cool. Hurts more than if a kid said it.”

“I have body dysmorphia and hated PE. Not because I was lazy, but that’s what they thought, so they kept giving me detention.”

“They [teachers] can be quite judgmental. I was in an RE class and there was a new teacher. He seemed lovely and everything, and we had to discuss what prejudice we’d faced and I was talking about homophobic bullying. And he [the teacher] said ‘you’re gay?’ and I said yeh. He said it in a way I knew he had a problem with it. He asked me [in front of the class] what my parents thought about it and I said they were quite homophobic too. Then he asked “so is that why you’re gay then? Because your parents are homophobic and you’ve rebelled against it?’ I couldn’t believe it, and we talking about prejudice!”

“I got sent out of my RE class by my teacher for openly saying I was bisexual and wasn’t allowed back for 2 weeks.”

“The problem is we’ve got a generation of teachers who grew up when nothing was accepted. Things are different now but they don’t understand. It’s not just about sexuality or gender. It’s about everything, the whole spectrum of identities. They don’t understand us.”



Young people's views on how to prevent and respond to bullying

Young people felt that approaches to bullying, mental health and emotional well-being were strongly interconnected and needed a whole school approach to:

- Create an open environment, where bullying is acknowledged and there are clear and effective approaches to preventing and responding to it.
- Create a positive, open culture for good mental health and emotional well-being, to tackle stigma about mental health; to have clear approaches for supporting good mental health in all young people; approaches to effectively support young people with mental health issues in schools; and have clear approaches to supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of children who experience bullying or who bully others.

Prevention

Collaborative planning about bullying and young people's mental health support needs

Young people felt that schools should work with them collaboratively to develop shared plans to ensure a young person's mental health support needs are identified and planned for, to support them within the school and learning environment.

Young people felt these plans could be shared, to ensure relevant staff understood what a young person was experiencing and what support they require for their mental health. However, this should only be done with their explicit consent. Uncertainty about information sharing would prevent a young person from talking about bullying or their mental health. There needs to be clear process in place to ensure:

- Young people know the boundaries of confidentiality and what will happen if they talk about bullying and/or mental health issues, so they can make an informed choice.
- Any information recorded is developed in partnership with the young person.
- There is an agreement with the young person about what information will be shared and with whom.
- This information and any shared plans are regularly reviewed.

"You want to know that they won't tell anyone, so you feel secure."



Understanding of difference and diversity challenge stereotypes.

Young people felt that to tackle bullying, schools need to start with an environment where children are respected, where they feel safe, where difference and diversity is celebrated, and different identities are positively promoted. Young people felt that where certain issues or identities were 'invisible,' including for example, disability, mental health and sexuality, this made stigma and bullying more prevalent; affected their sense of self and identity; and would make it harder to tell if you were being bullied.

"We got taught homosexuality is a sin. When we're then bullied for being gay, how are we supposed to tell?"

Challenging language

"People always say you're mental... You're crazy."

"People don't understand mental health, so people think they can say something and it's just a joke. But they don't understand what someone is going through."

Young people felt it was important to challenge the use of discriminatory language in schools, to demonstrate this is unacceptable and to communicate to all that bullying is not tolerated. This included verbal abuse aimed at individuals, as well as the generalised use of derogatory language about mental health and other protected characteristics.

Whole school education about mental health and emotional well-being

"I understand it's difficult for them [teachers] because they have to look after so many kids at one time, but if they're in it, it's not just about teaching a subject. It's about teaching people relationships. There's no point people getting good grades if they then can't function properly in society."

Young people felt strongly that teaching and learning about mental health and emotional well-being should be taught throughout the school curriculum. They felt this was important to:

- Help create an open, positive atmosphere, so that children and young people understand mental health and emotional well-being and are able to recognise and talk about issues they are experiencing.

- Support children and young people to learn about developing healthy relationships.
- To challenge the stigma and isolation surrounding mental health and emotional difficulties in schools.
- Develop a clear understanding in schools about the challenges children and young people can experience with their mental health.
- Develop clear strategies to support children and young people who are experiencing mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties.
- Create better awareness of the impact of bullying on mental health, self-esteem and identity.

“Could give good examples [in lessons] about people who have made it, but have a mental health problem. Just to show kids that it’s not all downhill [if you have mental health problems]”

“Teaching about emotional health and relationships. Because when I left school I didn’t know anything about relationships or confidence. I didn’t even know the word mental health existed.”

“There should be a class where they teach about mental health. I don’t ever remember learning about mental health.”

“Need to understand, from primary, about how our behaviour impacts on others. Need to start early. Not just about bullying, it’s about relationships. Knowing you’re listened to.”

Whole school education about bullying

Children and young people felt there should be better whole school education about bullying. They felt this should be an ongoing dialogue in schools, rather than being reactive to incidents, to ensure that bullying based on mental health, disability or emotional and behavioural difficulties was understood and taken as seriously as racist or homophobic bullying. They felt schools should create an open atmosphere that acknowledges bullying happens, to keep it out in the open rather than hidden.



“You can’t stop bullying happening, but you can stop it getting worse [and] becoming a big problem.”

Young people also felt it was important to hear personal stories about bullying and to have positive role models, to support them to talk about bullying more openly.

“As teachers if they’ve been victims or bullies, what are their experiences? Can they share with their students somehow? If the students hear experiences could be good, could change perception, open up possibilities to approach the subject.”

“More awareness about bullying, not just one lesson every year.”

Whole school approach to bullying: Clear policies, procedures and named staff

“Much more effective to have a school that says, ‘yes we do have bullying, but this is how we deal with it’. Otherwise YP will feel worse and worse because they have a problem that supposedly isn’t happening.”

“Specific member of staff for pastoral care. They have it in prisons, why not in schools?”

“Like at work, you have a problem you go to HR. They deal with things. You need that in schools. A named person. Where to go. They’ll investigate. Do something about it.”

“If I think about my school, I wouldn’t have a clue what the process or procedure about bullying was or what would happen if I told.”

“When you go for counselling or something, they sit you down and they’re like ‘this is what will happen if you disclose this’. There needs to something more like that explained to students, so they can then choose to talk or not about bullying. You can make a proper choice then to tell or not. At least you have the opportunity to think things through.”

Young people felt there should be clear, transparent and visible policies and procedures for preventing and responding to bullying. This should include named staff with clear roles, for example pastoral staff or mentors, to make bullying strategies visible and so that children and young people would know who they could talk to.

They felt bullying policies should be inclusive of mental health, emotional and behavioural difficulties, by promoting an understanding of the impact of bullying on children and young people’s mental health, behaviour, and include signs to look out for. Young people felt some of the signs of bullying or mental health issues, could be seen in changes in children and young people’s behaviour, and included:

- A decline in schoolwork.
- Missing lessons.
- Changes in their normal behaviour (Not just negative, could also be a sudden improvement, as they are isolated and spending more time on their schoolwork).
- Changes in personal care, such as body odour, or not looking after their appearance.



Young people felt it was particularly important to be proactive and look behind behaviour which may seem 'disruptive' or 'challenging,' as this was often a key sign of difficulties or distress.

"If they're quite a quiet person and all of a sudden they start acting out, like it's not because they just want to be naughty. They want the attention. They want someone to notice what's going on. They're telling you something."

[Young people who are acting out because they are bullied] **"They're the ones that get into trouble and it makes them feel like they're different and they're not gonna trust the teachers. And then it'll just carry on. You see the same people doing it again and again. Sending them out of class or giving them detention doesn't help because they just come back worse. Vicious circle. Not getting the help they need. They're just getting judged on how they're acting, not what's behind that. Just think they're being difficult."**

"Normally people who are disruptive get sent out of class or detention or can't get their qualifications, when it could be because they're struggling with their emotions. Obviously there's something going on if someone is angry or they lash out. There must be something behind that, not just that the kid is a problem. Like in school if people got kicked out, they didn't do their exams. I don't think that's ... that's just not right."

[Teacher:] **"I used to work with a lad who used to zip his jacket up over his head. At first I thought he was just being rude. But what worked was asking to talk to him. Not a detention. Just a talk, to see what was going on and what he was going through."**

Buddy systems and safe places to go for support

“Like maybe having groups, like, innit. Where you can go and you know people won’t bother you and that. That people will, like, understand you and you can talk if you wanna.”

“They could do after school clubs, a short course, help them get a hobby, maybe help them realise they need support.”

“I’ve just thought, like a buddy system for people with mental health in schools.”

Young people proposed a range of activities or safe places to go, that could support children if they had been bullied, give them things to do if they were being isolated or excluded, and to have somewhere non-stigmatising where they could talk.

These included:

- Social or activity groups at lunch times or after school, so that young people can get involved with activities if they are feeling isolated or excluded. This could enable them to feel safer to talk about issues they are experiencing.
- Trained peer mediators or mentors, for young people to talk to about bullying.
- Named staff or counsellors to talk to about bullying and/or mental health issues and emotional difficulties. This should be private, confidential and support the young person to explore a range of strategies and/or develop a shared plan.

Making the school a safer environment

Young people talked of bullying happening more frequently when there was little or no supervision. They felt schools could be made safer environments by improving supervision at key times or spaces. They suggested that schools could map the school environment with children and young people, to understand where bullying happened most frequently and plan ways to improve the safety of these areas.

Improving teacher training and education in mental health, emotional well-being and bullying

“They think their job is just to teach. As simple as that. Just to teach the material. But it’s not that. The job is to support the whole classroom.”

Young people felt that initial and ongoing teacher training should include a stronger focus on mental health, emotional well-being, how to support positive behaviour and relationships, and how to understand what is behind children and young people’s behaviour, so that they better understood this could be an expression or communication of difficulties or distress.

“They think they can’t fix it, so they do nothing”

Improve support for young people with mental health issues

“I think they just see mental health as like, they see it just as, like, a thing that’s just there, that they can’t do anything about.”

Young people felt there should be improved planning and support for children and young people with mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties. They felt this should be done in partnership with children and young people to create shared support plans. For example, one young person with mental health issues talked about being given a time out card. If they were struggling in a class, they could put the card on the table and leave the class for some time out. This helped them to feel more in control, enabled them to deal more effectively with their difficult emotions, and enabled them to stay in school. Other young people talked of having a key member of staff that regularly checked in with them, throughout the school day, to see how they were. If they indicated they were having a difficult day, they were given time to talk with the member of staff privately at the end of the day.

Recording and responding

Recording incidents

Young people felt strongly that bullying incidents should be recorded, to ensure:

- Bullying is taken seriously and young people know it has been acknowledged.
- There is oversight of individual bullying incidents and what actions have been taken, to ensure incidents are responded to effectively. This should also indicate what support has been provided to support the young person's mental health and emotional well-being.
- The school has an overview of bullying incidents and can use this information to review and plan effective prevention and responses.

These records need to be stored securely and confidentially.

"When I went to that person, she recorded all of my issues down and just, like, put them somewhere where everyone could see it. Had my name on it and stuff. So all the staff knew what was going on with me. And then they all started going, 'Ah, are you OK?' and stuff. They didn't help though. They were just asking. Just curious."

Acknowledgement

Many young people talked of receiving little or no support when they reported they were being bullied. This compounded their already difficult feelings, left many feeling isolated and meant bullying often became persistent and long-term.

"I got beaten up. The teacher just watched. They said they couldn't pull them off me, as it was against their health and safety."

"I think that if people are getting bullied in school, they have a duty of care as teachers to sort it out. If it happens in school it's their duty of care."

"Don't just take things at face value, like, just because a group says nothing is going on, don't always take that or walk off."

"Teachers knowing about bullying, but not doing [expletive] all about it."

Open door policies: Knowing people will listen

“Give people time. Time to talk about it in their own time. Just let them know you’re there.”

“Teacher: Sometimes it’s just taking some time out. You have so many students that you’re rushing, rushing, rushing. You need to take some time out and talk to the person and let them know that you’re there for them.

Young person: Yeh, like just letting them know that there’s, like, support. Like, they might not wanna talk about it, but if they know someone is there to listen and have time to help them, then that might make them feel OK to open up about it.”

Young people’s overarching message to improve responses to bullying was simply for teachers and school staff to make it clear they were there to listen. They said that even if they didn’t feel able to open up straight away, that if teachers and other school staff made it clear they were always there to listen, it would encourage them to build up the confidence to talk. This included being proactive in noticing changes in children and young people’s behaviour and approaching them to offer care, time and support.

Collaborative planning with the young person

“Having some to check in with you, check how things are going. Knowing there’s someone there for you.”

“I think the worst thing teachers can do is if you say there’s a problem and they say, ‘OK I’ll talk to them’ then it makes it worse. Because you’re like I told you confidence and now it looks a hundred times worse.”

“Otherwise it feels like you’ve just set something off. All these dominos and you can’t stop it. It can get out of control.”

“Should be more to support you. Like, ‘this has happened,’ but help you, give you the means to figure it out, to try to do something about it.”

“I don’t need someone to fight my battles, I can fight my own. You just need to help me to do that.”

“Graduated response, not all guns blazing.”

Many young people said that being uncertain about how teachers would respond to bullying had prevented them from talking about it. They said a rushed or immediately punitive reaction from teachers could make the situation worse, and

made them concerned about potential retaliation from other students. Young people said that they wanted:

- A graduated response to bullying, with a range of strategies and options to discuss with the young person.
- To develop a shared plan with teachers, about how to respond to bullying and for emotional support, that outlines what will happen, when and who the information will be shared with.
- Support to enable the young person to develop and try out ways of dealing with the bullying, before further intervention from others.

Young people felt that collaborative planning with the young person was crucial to enable them to regain some sense of control. Control is one of the key things that bullying takes away from young people who are being bullied. Young people felt strongly that if a sense of control is not regained, then young people can often seek to find a sense of control in other ways, for example, through self-harm.

Providing support for young people's mental health and emotional well-being

"Somewhere where you can go. Like a place where you could go to access help if you're struggling. We never had that. You had a unit for, say, learning support, but you didn't know where to go if you had mental health problems."

"I used to have panic attacks and the teachers never noticed it. They never noticed it."

Young people felt it was crucial to provide support for the mental health and emotional well-being for any child or young person who had experienced bullying as this was often left unaddressed. Young people also felt it as important to explore and address the mental health or emotional well-being of children and young people who bully others. They felt many young people bully others because they do not understand the impact of their behaviour, because they are experiencing difficulties, or may have unmet mental health or emotional issues.

"A lot of people may not realise that the bully may have stuff going on too, in the background. If they sorted out the bully there might not be so many victims. But they always just focus on the victim. Always good to sort out what's going in the bully's head."

"Teachers tend to focus on the victim, but I think they should focus on the bully because there's obviously something with the bully that's making them do it. Home life, whatever it is. So if they could sort out the bully, that would save so many people grief."

“But the bullies, a lot of them also have mental health [issues]. Because they’re taking their frustrations out on the weaker people. It’s stupid.”

“Maybe they have problems themselves or they just wanna look cool. They need help to understand. Change their attitude.”

“Everyone’s actions have a reason or a cause. Both need help. Both need counseling.”