

United Against Bullying School Case Study: Using structured play to improve relationships

How Devonshire Road Primary School used structured play to improve relationships

Context of our anti-bullying work

We have had a strong Antibullying policy in place for a number of years. In 2018, we were awarded the Anti Bullying Bronze Equality Mark. We are a telling school and do not shy away from naming bullying as bullying. In an ideal world there would be no bullying incidents at all. However, as a school, we recognise that we are here to teach our children how to navigate relationships and conflict as they are growing up, not just the traditional academic subjects. We recognise that in a school of 420 children, there will be relational conflict and there will also be bullying. The Anti Bullying Alliance training that our AB leads completed on 25th February 2021 gave us a fresh perspective to how bullying is a group activity, even if it initially looks like it is just between the “target” and the “ring leader”. We are developing our approach to working with the wider group to effectively tackle the bullying.

What we hoped to achieve

Between December and January, we had an on-going case of conflict between two sets of friends in Year 6. In late January, after working with the children and observing the situation the Anti Bullying leads classified the case as bullying. On-going work was done to ensure that the conflict, which normally happened at lunch time when the children were playing basketball, wouldn't happen again. We found that we were able to put actions in place to separate the children and prevent any more conflict, but there was little or no remorse from the ring leaders and a lack of empathy for how they felt. School felt that this meant that the situation hadn't been addressed properly and might lead to further incidents in future.

The action we took

The Anti Bullying lead devised a programme of restorative work between the children.

The children were encouraged, not forced, to come together for the first ten minutes of their lunch playtime each day to play games with the Anti Bullying lead. To stay inside during the cold month of February was often seen as a treat to most children so they agreed straight away! The targets were spoken to first – this wouldn't have happened if they felt uncomfortable.

To begin with, the AB lead choose which games would be played. They played dominos, junior monopoly. It was explained to the children that the aim was to learn to get along – they didn't need to be best friends – but they did need to be respectful and share a space together. The AB lead chose the teams and ensured that the children were in teams with children they didn't normally play with. The conflict had actually developed over very competitive games of basketball so pairing the children together with the children they had conflict with, and exploiting their competitive nature benefited the process. They spent a full week playing games for 10 - 20 minutes a day with the AB lead.

Throughout the week, the children started to enjoy winning together/commiserate their team mate for losing. They started to develop conversation with each other and seemed happier in each other's company. The ring leaders were seen asking casual questions about day-to-day things with the targets and by the end of the week, at the end of the session, the children would all walk off together, not in two groups. The next week, the children asked if they could continue and started to bring in games that they wanted to play.

Impact and outcomes of the work

By the end of the second week, all children reported that they felt happy in each other's company and the "targets" reported that they weren't worried about the situation anymore.

There have been no further incidents between the children to date.

Check-in dates with the targets/victims have been positive.

What we have learned

We still have a long way to go with our work on including the whole group in our restorative work. Restoration is always our end point as our children need to be able to tolerate the same space as their peers – separate in a primary school is rarely sustainable/achievable. In this situation, this worked. Knowing the children and knowing the root of the animosity helps devise a plan to help the children restore/rebuild a relationship. This only comes after initially removing the targets from harm.