

BANTER OR BULLYING? NAVIGATING THE LINE OF ACCEPTABILITY: A TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOLS AND SETTINGS



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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Nottingham Trent University spoke to 884 teachers about banter and bullying. Amongst them, 37% percentage of teachers felt very equipped to manage bullying, and **only 19% percentage of teachers felt very equipped to manage banter**. Their also research found that:



Over a quarter **(26%)** of teachers think that banter is a serious problem within schools



37% of teachers said they thought banter was a serious problem online



84% of teachers have received no training about banter



64% of teachers said they have no policy for dealing with banter

This toolkit, developed by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and Nottingham Trent University, aims to address this, and help school staff and professionals working with children and young people to understand the difference between banter and bullying. It will also equip practitioners to teach children and young people how to navigate line of acceptability between banter and harmful behaviour, while also providing guidance on creating a whole-school or setting approach to prevent the misuse of banter.



WHAT IS BANTER?

There are many different opinions about banter between children and young people, for example:

"Banter is a fun communication style between friends."

"Banter is an excuse to send mean messages to others."

"There is that fine line between like, having a joke and then like, actually offending someone... Even if they didn't mean it, it could be classed as like, offensive."

- Eli, Year 10¹

It's important first to understand what banter is (and what it isn't).

THE DEFINITION OF BANTER

The dictionary definition of 'banter' is:

*"the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks."*²

Banter is a **playful** and **positive part of relationship building**, and it is **reciprocal interaction** where both parties join in. It has sometimes been described as 'verbal ping-pong'³, with individuals taking turns in exchanging banter.

A banter interaction between friends might sometimes seem a contradictory social situation (especially for an outsider), since it often involves an offensive/negative comment or action **which has no intent to cause emotional injury or to insult**.

It is also vitally important to have a solid understanding of what bullying is when working to prevent the misuse of banter. ABA defines bullying as:

"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online."

We have more information on our website about understanding the definition of bullying, including a [free online CPD training module](#).

[1] Steer, O. L., Betts, L. R., Baguley, T., & Binder, J. F. (2020). "I feel like everyone does it" – adolescents' perceptions and awareness of the association between humour, banter, and cyberbullying. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 108, 106297.

[2] Oxford Languages via Google.

[3] Dymel, M. (2008). No aggression, only teasing: The pragmatics of teasing and banter. *Lodz papers in pragmatics*, 4(2), 241–261. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10016-008-0001-7>

[4] Steer, O. L., Betts, L. R., Baguley, T., & Binder, J. F. (2020). "I feel like everyone does it" – adolescents' perceptions and awareness of the association between humour, banter, and cyberbullying. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 108, 106297.

"Banter's just like, kind of, it's, well, it's with your mates because you can't really have banter with somebody they don't know cause then, that's bullying."

- Ben, Year 9⁴

TYPES OF BANTER

Verbal banter

Verbal banter can include when friends playfully criticise or 'put down' each other with teasing remarks, or might include using a playful nickname (which might sound offensive to an outsider). See the quote below from two young people in Year 9 about using verbal banter to tease someone for falling over.



Physical banter

Physical banter might be in the form of touching, such as mock-hitting, play fights or pretending to trip someone up.



Online banter

Any banter that happens via technology such as social media or virtual messaging would be considered as online banter. There are many different ways of engaging in online banter and it doesn't stop at just text-based communication. Memes, GIFs, emojis and other visuals can also be involved when it comes to online banter, as well as interactions such as 'likes'.



Ben: *But banter's just kind of, if you know someone well and you know that they won't get offended or whatever by something they say. Say have a little tease and a joke about it, you know. So let's say someone's fallen over something and you kinda laughing at them but you're like their mate so their just kinda like,*

Jayce: *Laughing with them.*

Ben: *Yeah, laughing with them instead of laughing at them⁵*

RECOGNISING BANTER

Recognising and appropriately engaging with banter relies heavily on both verbal and non-verbal cues. Given the often-contradictory nature of banter, these cues are crucial, as they can easily be misread or misused.

Verbal cues

Tone of voice is an important consideration when it comes to banter, and this can help people understand whether something is meant in jest.

Verbal communication can be received and understood differently depending on where people put emphasis on words. For example, saying "I **know** you like him" (with emphasis on the word 'know') or "I know you **like** him" (with emphasis on the word 'like') could change the perceived meaning of the sentence.



See page 22 for an activity you can use with young people that explores tone of voice, banter and bullying.

Non-verbal cues

A large proportion of our communication is dominated by non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language and physical touch.

For the person on the receiving end, these non-verbal cues are important to understand whether something is intended as banter: for example, the comment might be accompanied by a familiar and/or friendly physical gesture. These non-verbal cues should be reciprocal, and if the person on the receiving end seems unhappy or uncomfortable, that should send a message to the other person or people involved that they may need to adjust their behaviour so as not to overstep the mark, or potentially apologise for any unintentional harm caused.



It's important to remember that some people might find cues more difficult to understand and interpret for example neurodiverse young people.

Educating young people about the cues that might be used in an exchange of banter can equip them to be able to engage more positively with banter.

What about the online world?

There is usually no tone of voice or body language present in online communication that can be used as cues to help understand the meaning or intent behind what is being shared. Instead of body language, visuals such as emojis, GIFs or memes are used online to signal humour or other intent, replacing non-verbal cues like body language. Initialisms such as 'jk' (just kidding) or 'lol' (laugh out loud) are another way to signal meaning when communicating online.



Using these visual cues in online banter can go wrong because they rely on the audience interpreting their use in the same way as the sender. For example, an emoji needs to be understood to mean the same thing by both the sender and receiver, or the person who is the subject of a meme might not be 'in' on the joke. It should be noted that some emojis or other graphic/visuals can have different meanings from one young person to the next, and can have very different meanings for young people than for adults.⁷ For example, one study showed that while some emojis such as 😞 [frown] and 😡 [angry] were rated as having a single meaning (sad and angry respectively), 🤦 [facepalm] had 13 meanings and 😟 [concern] had 25.⁸

Additionally, emojis or other visual online cues could be misused to mask intent or downplay the significance of a comment.

[7] Badrakh, A., Buglass, S. L., Betts, L. R., & Abell, L. (2024). The role of digital cues in online banter: a systematic review of adolescents' and emerging adults' views, uses and interpretations. *Current Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06698-8>

[8] Wu et al. (2022)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BANTER AND BULLYING

Banter can be positive for our social relationships and for many of us it is part of our daily social interactions, generally understood to be a joke despite sometimes appearing aggressive in nature. However children and young people are still developing their social skills and may misjudge banter at times. In fact even adults can occasionally misstep, with words or actions unintentionally causing more harm than intended.

It is OK to make mistakes, but important to know the difference between banter and intentional unkind behaviour such as bullying. This means that sometimes we need to take time to consider how it might be interpreted by the person who's receiving it, and anyone else who might see or hear it, to make sure that we don't overstep the

"So bullying is more negative type and banter can be positive type. It's the way how you use the banter and how often you use it."

– Young Anti-Bullying Alliance member

mark. The next section of this toolkit will go into more detail about when banter can cross the line into potential bullying behaviour.

The important message to share with young people is that banter is playful, friendly and reciprocal by its very definition. Therefore **if something is being labelled 'banter' but it is hurting the person involved, it is no longer banter**, it has become hurtful behaviour and could potentially be considered bullying.



See pages 13–23 for some activities and ideas of how you could discuss this with children and young people.

It should be noted that banter might not only be occurring between children and young people in your school or setting (especially for those working with teenagers or older). Since banter is associated with the strengthening of relationships, it isn't uncommon for banter to occur between an adult member of staff and a young person. It is therefore important for adult practitioners to understand what banter is, and how to navigate the line of acceptability.

"Banter is between a group of people who understand each other's boundaries have a mutual understanding of each other and are all okay with what's being talked about. And bullying on the other hand is repetitive and it's people like targeting one person with the intent of harming or offending them."

– Young Anti-Bullying Alliance member

EQUIPPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND BANTER AND BULLYING

THE LINE OF ACCEPTABILITY

Data from Nottingham Trent University found that 62% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that there was a fine and subjective line between banter type and bullying type behaviours. Understanding where this line of acceptability lies is important when engaging in banter. This means understanding what is and isn't acceptable as banter, such as knowing which topics are acceptable to banter about, or who is acceptable to be involved in the banter.

Since we are all different, this line of acceptability for banter will look different to us all and can change depending on our emotions and situations. In fact, even though we may have a good idea about our own lines of acceptability, sometimes we may not know exactly where our line is until someone crosses it.

"It is about context and the way you say it to the person"

"It is important to have boundaries with banter. I guess everyone has them, there is a limit to it"

- Young Anti-Bullying Alliance members

"like with friends you know exactly, well, you might know exactly what they are going through, you might know about their home life, you might know about family life and friendship, and stuff like that, whereas if its someone you don't know, you don't know what's going off at home, you don't know if they've got mental health problems you know, it can obviously effect mental health." - Brea, Year 10⁹

"And friends know when like, not to cross the line, not to say something, know, like, personally, like, really upset them and not just be banter but people you don't know, when we're around know just, might say things that might cross the line, with like banter." - Holly, Year 10¹⁰



See page 14 for an activity that encourages young people to think about where their own line of acceptability is, how this can look different from person to person, and how it can change depending on who is involved and the subject.

Setting Boundaries

As well as respecting other people's boundaries, young people should also feel empowered to set their own boundaries with friends.

Even as adults we don't always know where a boundary is until we are explicitly told (or sometimes not even until we have crossed it). This means that sometimes we need to tell a friend to stop the banter if we feel upset or offended.

You could use drama as a tool to show young people how this could be done – for example, asking them to role-play a situation where someone has to tell their friend when banter has gone over the line of acceptability. You could also use examples from books, TV or films, or online videos.



See page 19 for an activity that encourages young people to think about setting boundaries.

8 WAYS BANTER CAN BECOME BULLYING

Research conducted with young people and teachers by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) found that there are 8 ways banter may turn into an unkind behaviour such as bullying. It is helpful to be aware of these 8 ways as a practitioner so that you can better prevent and respond to conflict issues that may arise from something that is being labelled as 'banter'.

It is also important to share and discuss these 8 ways with the young people you work with. It should be made clear to young people that **stepping over the line of acceptability with a friend could be seen as a violation of trust.**



See page 21 for suggested activities you can use to share and discuss the 8 ways banter can become bullying

1 Topic areas to avoid

NTU found that the topic areas to avoid when it comes to banter include those that are considered:



Sensitive
(such as self-harm or death)



Personal
(such as about family members)



Appearance-based



Use **offensive language.**

However, acceptable topics might also depend on who is involved in the banter. Having open conversations and setting boundaries with friends is a good way of identifying what these topics are and to avoid harming others.

2 Social context (or relationship with the person involved)

Banter is likely to be received more positively when between members of friendship groups you know and are close to, as they are more likely to know and understand the boundaries. When banter is shared outside of that group, the dynamic may have changed and it may no longer feel acceptable to the person on the receiving end.

"the only people who I would like [...] try and like have banter with and a bit of a joke with are people who like I'm like really close with so I'd know that they'd like understand the joke." - Messum, age 15¹¹

To meet legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 which require schools and settings to prevent discrimination – and ensure your school or setting isn't creating an environment in which young people are more likely to be bullied - **any banter involving derogatory or discriminatory language (e.g. racist, sexist, disablist or homophobic) should always be challenged, investigated and recorded.**

3 Private vs public

As mentioned in point 2, banter is a joking interaction between friends, **where all of those involved have a shared understanding of the situation**. However, when the same joke is shared to a bigger audience, especially with people who are less well-known to each other, this can affect whether something is banter or not. This is because of the potential loss of control of information and if more people hear the banter, they may repeat it in future or join in, potentially changing the nature of the banter to something more hurtful to the person on the receiving end.

"It's all kind of funny until other people get involved then it's not. They don't have the same mindset as you do, or they don't understand what's fully going on."

- Jane, 19¹²

4 Repetition

Although a comment meant as banter may start off as funny, when it is repeated many times, it is likely to be perceived more negatively because the element of reciprocity is lost.

5 Intent

Sometimes the term banter is used as a disguise for more negative intentional behaviours, or positively intended banter may have gone too far. Is the intent to cause harm, discomfort, social division/exclusion, or public embarrassment? Behaviour intended to cause harm is not banter, it is hurtful behaviour and potentially bullying.

6 Audience size

As group size increases the acceptability of banter may decrease. Different social groups (e.g., close friends, family members) may have different values and rules, meaning that banter could be interpreted differently. This links to points 2 and 3.

7 Reactions of the target

If the person on the receiving end of the banter feels uncomfortable or upset, regardless of the initial intent, the banter may be perceived as harmful behaviour such as bullying. Remember, **if something being labelled 'banter' is hurting the person on the receiving end, it is no longer banter**.

8 Interpreting the online world

In some cases, the meaning of our wording online and use of emojis, memes and GIFs, can be ambiguous, or may be used to try to pass bullying behaviour off as banter.

Making mistakes

The use of banter is often learned through experimentation, and young people are likely to need some support as they learn to navigate this. Through activities and discussions suggested in this toolkit, you can teach young people that even close friends may have different tolerances to banter, and that these tolerances themselves may change over time or from one subject to the next, therefore it's inevitable that we might make mistakes.

Where it seems banter between young people has stepped over the line, avoid making judgements too quickly and examine whether there is a learning opportunity to be had between those involved. If it seems on closer inspection that there was no intent to harm, you could use the principles of a restorative approach to work through the situation.

However, if the person continues to repeat the action or comment once they've been told it was hurtful, this would no longer be considered banter but hurtful behaviour, and potentially a case of bullying.

IMPLEMENTING A WHOLE-SCHOOL OR SETTING APPROACH

A strategic whole-school or setting approach to anti-bullying and the use of banter should incorporate many aspects:



Senior leadership

A positive ethos and culture which promotes positive relationships and behaviour cannot be delivered without strong school leadership which is authoritative and distributive in nature.^[13] **Your senior leadership team should have a solid understanding of your approach to banter and anti-bullying, understand your definition of bullying and the definition of banter.** Without strong leadership buy-in and support, your approach won't be consistent throughout your school or setting.



Consulting with the whole school or setting community

The approach you take to anti-bullying and banter should be developed in consultation with the young people themselves, staff and families. When young people and their families feel listened to, they are more likely to get on board and feel a sense of ownership over the approach you want to adopt within your school or setting, making it more likely to be successful. **Listen to all the voices in your school or setting community** and their thoughts on bullying and banter.



Strong policies

Nottingham Trent University found that 64% of teachers said they have no policy for dealing with banter. It is important that your approach to anti-bullying and banter as a school or setting is underpinned by **strong policies that are understood by the whole community.** We have guidance [on our website](#) about writing and refreshing anti-bullying policies. We would recommend adding a section on 'banter' to your anti-bullying policy, including the definition describing what banter is, and what it isn't.



Ethos and culture

Choosing to tell a friend when banter has gone too far can be difficult because of social pressures, lack of confidence or feeling like you need to 'fit in', and we know from research that sometimes young people don't speak up and just go along with the banter. Having **a strong ethos that promotes and champions self-efficacy and respect for one another** is vital to supporting young people in feeling safe and able to set these boundaries. It will also support them to feel able to speak out if those boundaries are crossed, and be open to restore and repair relationships if someone makes a mistake when engaging in banter.



Cross-curricular approaches

There are many opportunities through Relationships and Sex Education curriculum that allow the space to **discuss banter in the context of healthy friendships, and the difference between banter and bullying (including online)**. It is important to review how you are currently delivering this curriculum to ensure it promotes critical thinking, especially since banter is contradictory in its nature therefore can often be quite complex. You should aim to deliver this curriculum through more than just stand-alone lessons: weaving conversations about bullying, banter and healthy relationships into the school day such as form time, assemblies, or cross-curricular opportunities e.g. using fictional stories in English or drama lessons.



Training and staff development

It is vital to your whole school/setting approach that your staff understand and feel confident using your definitions of bullying, and the definition of banter. The Anti-Bullying Alliance has an entire e-learning library, including an e-learning course about the [definition of bullying](#), [banter and bullying](#), and [other anti-bullying courses](#) on specific topics such as bullying and the law, or appearance targeted bullying.



Effective prevention strategies

ABA's key elements to bullying prevention are:

1. Understanding what bullying is and isn't
2. Creating a respectful culture
3. Celebrating difference in all
4. Challenging derogatory language

For more information about these effective prevention approaches take a look at ABA's bullying prevention guide [here](#).



Effective reporting and recording systems

Young people should feel comfortable and confident to report when something being labelled as 'banter' feels like bullying, and they should have a variety of ways to reporting this that account for communication needs and allows them to feel safe and secure in reporting. **You should also be collating data about banter and bullying that will allow you to be able to be proactive and notice any trends.** For more information about reporting and recording methods, take a look at ABA's guide on reporting and recording [here](#).



Effective response strategies

When banter has crossed the line into more hurtful behaviour, effective, informed and well-planned responses are critical to lessening the negative impact this might have on the young people involved. ABA's bullying response model encourages schools and other settings to respond through a 3-staged approach:

- Step 1. Secure the safety of those involved
- Step 2. Work with the group
- Step 3. Whole-school learning

To learn more about the 3 stages and an effective response model, take a look at ABA's bullying response guide [here](#).

ACTIVITIES TO USE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This section of the toolkit gives you some activities such as discussion starters, assemblies and lesson plans that can be adapted as needed to the children and young people you work with. **Please ensure you read through each activity thoroughly before delivering anything with young people**, and think about whether the content is appropriate for the group you're working with. You may need to adapt or differentiate the activities.

Important note before delivering

For some young people, particularly those that might be being bullied or those bullying, discussions about bullying can be hard. Therefore, it's important to consider this during planning to ensure all lessons and activities are delivered sensitively. As the adult delivering the session:

- Read through the contents of these resources, handouts and videos to ensure they are suitable for the children and young people you're working with e.g., do you need to consider if case studies need names changing? Or if do they need to be adapted for some of the young people?
- Consider any young people who are currently experiencing or witnessing bullying and identify how you will tackle this before delivering the session
- Think about coming up with ground rules or reminders about how to work together respectfully to help create a safe and supportive environment
- Be aware of any changes in behaviour during the session as this may highlight a bullying-related issue
- Try to avoid anyone from disclosing personal information or specific incidents during the session but remind them who they can talk to if they are worried about friendship issues, banter or bullying



SHORT DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Discussion: Finding your line of acceptability

Important! Before completing this activity, ensure you have shared and discussed with young people the definition of banter, and the definition of bullying (see the Assembly or Lesson plans for ways you could deliver this). We recommend this activity for ages 10+.

Explain to the young people that when engaging in banter with friends, there is always a 'line of acceptability' at play, or a line that friends will know not to cross, as crossing the line will mean hurting their friend and/or betraying their trust. However, we don't always know where that line is with our friends.

Ask the young people to think about where their own line of acceptability is when it comes to engaging in banter. Ask them:

1. **What topics would you be happy bantering about with your closest friend?**
2. **Would you be happy to banter about these topics with other friends; classmates; acquaintances; strangers?**

Through this discussion, encourage young people to think about what topics they feel comfortable bantering or joking about, and how that changes depending on who you are with.

You could end this discussion by discussing the fact that, although we may have a good idea about our own lines of acceptability, **sometimes we may not know exactly where our line is until someone crosses it.** This is where being open and honest with our friends is important, as well as showing empathy, being a good listener and saying sorry (and meaning it, i.e. not repeating the same behaviour again).

Conversation starters

Use these questions as conversation starters with young people to get them talking about banter and bullying:

For younger children:

- What does bullying mean to you?
- What does it mean to be a good friend?
- What does it mean to have a joke or 'banter' with your friends?
- Have you ever been upset by something that somebody said was a 'joke'?
- What would you do if you upset someone by making a joke?
- How can we make sure we don't hurt others when we're enjoying a joke with our friends?

For older children:

- What does bullying mean to you?
- What are the different roles people have in a bullying situation?
- What does banter mean to you?
- What does it mean to be a good friend?
- How is banter a positive thing for friendships?
- How do you know when you have crossed a line and hurt someone when using banter?
- What can you do if your 'banter' has hurt someone?
- What can you do if something labelled as 'banter' is hurting or upsetting you?
- What is the difference between banter and bullying?
- In what ways are face-to-face and online bullying the same/different?
- In what ways are face-to-face and online banter the same/different?
- What advice would you give to younger children about knowing the difference between banter and bullying?

BANTER & BULLYING ASSEMBLY / PRESENTATION

This activity is intended to be delivered as an assembly or an information-giving presentation about banter and bullying, depending on the school or setting you are working in. This assembly plan would be appropriate for children aged 9+, but can easily be adapted for younger children or young adults.



Duration: 15 mins approx.

Aims:



- To understand the definition of 'bullying' and of 'banter', and the difference between the two
- To promote empathy and empowerment amongst young people

Resources and preparation:



- Please ensure you have read through the instructions and accompanying powerpoint before delivering, and made any adjustments or differentiation required.
- Download the accompanying powerpoint on our website page [here](#).
- Personalise the final slide on the powerpoint to your school or setting.

Assembly/Presentation Plan:

Display Slide 2 – Bullying definition

Explore the definition of bullying with young people. You can use the Anti-Bullying Alliance's definition (shared on the slide), or you could use your school or setting's own definition if it differs. ABA's definition is:

"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face to face or online"

Display Slide 3 – What is banter?

Questions to ask:

- What is 'banter'?
- What examples can you give?



Display Slide 4 – Banter Is...

Read the definition displayed on the slide:

“the harmless exchange of social interaction between friends which involves teasing or mocking one another, either on a one-to-one basis or more commonly on a friendship group basis.”

Ask young people to think about the meaning of banter and compare to the definition of bullying – what is the difference between the two?

Questions to ask:

- What are the main differences between banter and bullying? Some examples could be: saying unkind things, playing mean tricks or making a joke with a friend.
- When does banter stop being fun?



Ask them to share some possible situations where friendly exchanges could turn into bullying and what they could do to try and stop this from happening, and the best way to respond when it does happen.

Display Slide 6 – It's not banter if...

Read the information on the slide:

It's not banter if:

1. You would be upset if someone said it to you
2. It's hurtful
3. You're not friends
4. Someone's asked you to stop
5. The person isn't laughing
6. It focuses on someone's insecurities.

Display Slide 7 – Who can you talk to?



Ensure you have personalised this slide before delivering.

Explain that if they are worried about bullying, or about banter that might be taken too far, young people should speak out and talk to a trusted adult or a friend. Remind them who in your school or setting they can come to if they are worried, and remind them about any other reporting methods you might have in place.



BANTER & BULLYING LESSONS / ACTIVITIES

The following activities are intended for a classroom or more interactive setting than the previous one. There are two options available: one for younger (primary school age) children and one for older children and young people (secondary school and older).

For Younger Children



Duration: 60 – 90 mins approx.

This could be reduced or used as 2 (or more) separate sessions as you see fit



Aims:

- To be able to define bullying, and banter
- To recognise the difference between banter and bullying

Resources and preparation:



- Please ensure you have read through the instructions and accompanying powerpoint before delivering, and made any adjustments or differentiation required.
- Download the accompanying powerpoint on our website page [here](#).
- Personalise the final slide on the powerpoint to your school or setting.
- Download the accompanying 'Bantometer' handout for this session and print or share as necessary. Download the handout [here](#).

Lesson/Activity Plan:

Display Slide 2 & 3 – Definitions of 'banter' and 'bullying'

Read the 2 definitions shared on the slides:

Banter: *"The playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks."*

Bullying: *"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online."*

Take the time to discuss the definitions with children, exploring how they differ.

Display Slide 4 – Banter with friends

Ask children what banter means to them, how do they 'banter' with each other, and if they think it's a good thing? Then explain the positives of banter listed in the slide:

Banter with friends can:

- Make you feel closer to each other.
- Be a light-hearted and funny way to pass time.
- Show acceptance in a friendship group.
- Show you trust each other.



Ask children in groups to think of some examples of what banter might sound like. Examples may include funny names they may use for their friends e.g. "silly sausage" or making fun of something they love e.g. "you might turn into a football if you don't stop talking about it!"

Display Slide 5 – When Banter Becomes Bullying

Explain to children that sometimes jokes can be taken too far and potentially become bullying behaviours. Here we have listed the different ways research says banter can be bullying. You can adapt the language to make it suitable to the children you are working with:

- **Topic:** topics that are sensitive, personal, appearance-based, or use offensive language are considered not appropriate to joke about as banter.
- **Relationship:** banter and jokes are more appropriate with friends and people close to you.
- **Where it happens:** if banter takes place in public where other people outside your friendship group can hear, it is more likely to be seen as bullying.
- **Repetition:** is the joke repeated a lot? If so, it may stop being funny.
- **Intention:** is the intent to cause harm or hurt? If so, this is not banter.
- **Reaction:** if the person receiving the banter feels uncomfortable or upset, then it's time to stop.

Display Slide 6 – Design a 'Bantometer'

Tell children that we are now going to design our own 'Bantometer', showing when banter can turn to bullying. Give examples for each interval, showing how it can turn from harmless to hurtful. You can get as creative as you like, using different materials and designs. On the slide you will see some design examples to guide you.

Give out handouts (if using) for children to design their Bantometers onto. When they are done, allow time for children to share and talk through their designs.

Many of the activities within this session, such as the Bantometer activity, could be adapted to be used as a shorter, standalone activity!

Display Slide 7 – Who can you talk to?

Ensure you have personalised this slide before delivering.

Finish the session by explaining that if they are worried about bullying, or about banter that might be taken too far, they should speak out and talk to a trusted adult or a friend. Remind them who in your school or setting they can come to if they are worried, and remind them about any other reporting methods you might have in place.

For Older Children



Duration: 60 – 120 mins approx.

This could be reduced or used as 2 (or more) separate sessions as you see fit



Aims:

- To be able to define bullying, and banter
- To recognise the difference between banter and bullying



Resources and preparation:

- Please ensure you have read through the instructions and accompanying powerpoint before delivering, and made any adjustments or differentiation required.
- Download the accompanying powerpoint on our website page [here](#).
- Personalise the final slide on the powerpoint to your school or setting.
- Download the accompanying handouts for this session and print or share as necessary. Download the handouts [here](#).



Useful links:

- **Video 1:** [Young ABA: Banter and bullying](#)
- **Video 2:** [Young ABA: Understanding the Difference Between Bullying and Banter](#)
- **Video 3:** [Young ABA: Having Boundaries with Banter](#)

Lesson/Activity Plan:

Display Slide 2 – Banter vs Bullying video

Play Video 1 (on the slide), which is of our Young Anti-Bullying Alliance members discussing the difference between banter and bullying.

Ask young people to share their thoughts on the content of the video. Would you agree with the distinctions made in the video? Do you think they are fair statements? How do you think the behaviours are different?

Display Slide 3 – What is banter?

Here we have provided a definition of banter, but you could adopt your own for suitability. Banter is:

"Banter is the harmless exchange of social interaction between friends which involves teasing or mocking one another, either on a one-to-one basis or more commonly on a friendship group basis."

A banter interaction between friends is potentially a contradictory social situation in that it often involves an offensive/negative comment or action which has no intent to cause emotional injury or to insult. Banter can take several forms including verbal, physical, and online. Banter can make friendships stronger and make people feel closer to each other, be a light-hearted way to pass time, show acceptance in a friendship group, and show friends trust each other.

Display Slide 4 – Definition of bullying

Here we have provided a definition of bullying, but you could include your own definition and ask the young people what their understanding of the definition is. ABA define bullying as:

"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face to face or online"

Display Slide 5 & 6 – How banter can become bullying

In this part of the session we want to encourage young people to think about how behaviours that they may think of as banter, could be taken too far and potentially become bullying behaviours.

Videos 2 & 3 (on the slides) are of the Young Anti-Bullying Alliance members discussing the issues related to 'banter' and 'bullying'. The videos shared shows scenes of the young people discussing the boundaries of 'banter' and how they can be crossed into bullying, along with the role of 'context'. Start by watching the videos linked below and ask young people whether they agree about the importance of context and whether people sometimes take banter too far so that it may become bullying?

Next, ask young people if they can think of some examples of how boundaries are crossed? How do they think it could be addressed in a non-aggressive, assertive manner? After the discussion, and before moving on to the activity below, share slides 7 and 8, which provide practical and clear examples of when banter can cross the line and become bullying.

Display Slide 7 – When is banter actually bullying?

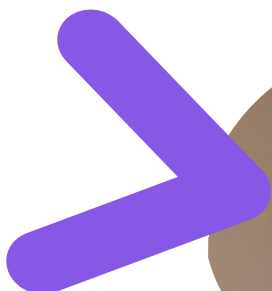


Note – we also have a video of these points, available [here](#)

Friendly banter is fun, right? But what happens when it crosses that line and is bullying in disguise?

1. Think before you speak. Would it be funny if someone said the same things to you?
2. Don't pick on someone's insecurities, that's a low blow.
3. Be aware whether someone is clearly not enjoying the 'banter'. If they're not, STOP!
4. Don't laugh along if you're not finding it funny.
5. Saying something is 'just banter' doesn't mean it is. There's a line, don't cross it.'

Can they think of examples where they've witnessed this, or been on the receiving end? How do they think someone on the receiving end may feel? Ask them to shout out some examples.



Display Slide 8 – It's not banter if...

Read the content from the slide:

It's not banter if...

1. **You would be upset if someone said it to you.**
2. **It's hurtful.**
3. **You're not friends.**
4. **Someone's asked you to stop.**
5. **The target isn't laughing**
6. **It focuses on someone's insecurities'**

Ask young people to share their thoughts on each of the 6 points. How do they know if it could hurtful? What do they think is meant by insecurities? Do they think it's acceptable to 'banter' with someone if they're not friends? Or continue if they've been asked to stop?

Display slide 9 – The ways banter may become bullying

Explain to young people that research shows there are ways banter may become bullying, and share the 8 ways on the slide. You may want to give young people the opportunity to vote on which of the eight ways they think are important. They could vote for as many as they want.

Name each way and ask them to think about which ones they agree with and why each way may mean that a behaviour changes from banter to bullying. Then go through each and explain as below:

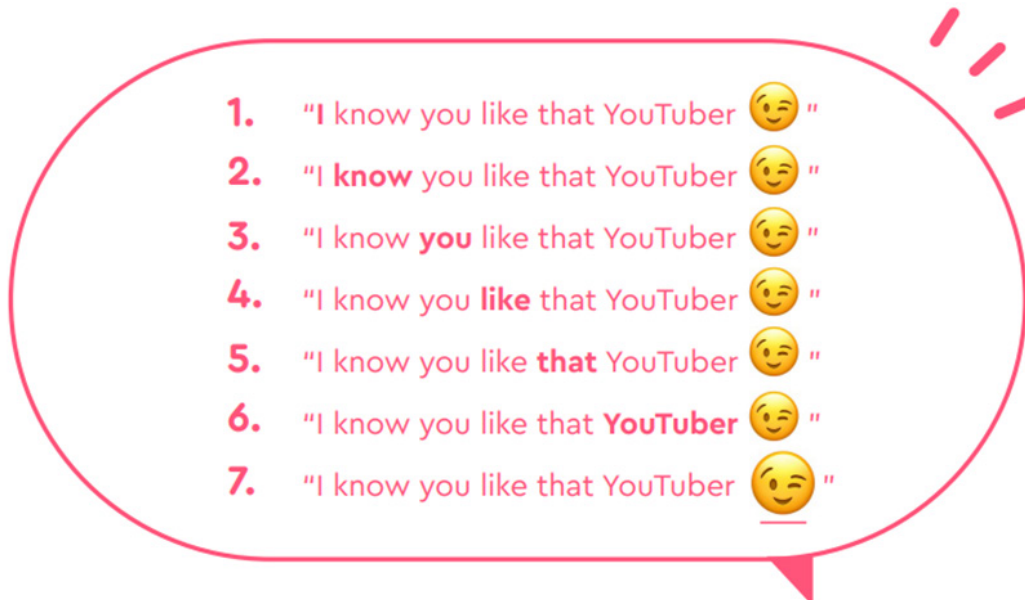
1. **Topic of the banter** – topics that are sensitive, personal, appearance-based, or use offensive language are often considered not appropriate to joke about as banter.
2. **The relationship with the person** – banter is more likely to be received positively by people or friendship groups that you know and are close to.
3. **Where the banter is happening** – if the banter happens in more public settings or includes individuals beyond a friendship group, then this is more likely to be perceived as bullying. This is because of the potential loss of control of information and if more people hear the banter, they may repeat it in future or join in.
4. **Whether the banter is repeated** – if the banter is repeated many times, then it may stop being funny.
5. **The intent behind the banter** – is the intent to cause harm, discomfort, social division/exclusion, or public embarrassment? We often use verbal and physical cues to signal intent, but these may be harder to understand in the online world.
6. **The size of the audience** – as group size increases the acceptability of banter may decrease. Different social groups (e.g., close friends, family members) may have different values and rules, meaning that banter could be interpreted differently.
7. **The reactions of the target** – if the person receiving the banter feels uncomfortable, regardless of the initial intent, the banter may be perceived as bullying
8. **Interpreting the online world** – in some cases the meaning of our wording online and use of emojis, memes and gifs, can be ambiguous or may be used to try to pass bullying behaviour off as banter.

Explain that banter between friends can become bullying, especially in these 8 ways explained. **Sometimes the target of the banter may downplay the significance of the comments: this doesn't mean that they're not hurt by it, nor does it minimise the impact it has on them.**

Display slide 10 – (Mis)-Communication

To explore more about how our words can be interpreted, especially online, run this short activity with young people. Select 7 young people to come to the front and allocate a word from the sentence on the slide to each of the young people (note: feel free to adapt the sentence to one of your own if you wish). Ask them to read out the sentence 7 times – you can give them the (Mis)-Communication handout to help you do this.

Every time the sentence is read out, ask each young person put more emphasis on the word (or emoji) in bold:

- 
1. "I know you like that YouTuber **😉** "
 2. "I **know** you like that YouTuber **😉** "
 3. "I know **you** like that YouTuber **😉** "
 4. "I know you **like** that YouTuber **😉** "
 5. "I know you like **that** YouTuber **😉** "
 6. "I know you like that **YouTuber** **😉** "
 7. "I know you like that YouTuber **😉** "

Once they finish reading out the sentences, ask if the different emphases changed the meaning of the sentence? The message should be that language is not just the words we say, but how we say something, such as tone of voice or body language. It is important to consider how our words could be taken. When you're online, the audience is left to decide what your emphasis is, which can lead to misunderstandings that may not happen face-to-face, so it's important to think about that when sending messages online.

Note: Consider whether to use the emoji. You could ask them to do an understated 'wink face' for each one until it's time to emphasise the emoji when they can do an exaggerated 'wink face' – this is to make the activity more fun. Depending on your class, the winky face emoji might not be appropriate, so you might want to remove or replace it. The message in the emoji is to start a conversation about how emojis can also be taken the wrong way and have different meanings to people. If the emoji is removed, ensure you include the conversation about emojis.

i Many of the activities within this session, such as the (Mis)-Communication activity, could be adapted to be used as a shorter, standalone activity!

Display slides 11–16 – Identifying how banter may become bullying

Give out the Banter or Bullying Scenarios handout. In small groups, ask young people to discuss one or more of the scenarios that describe behaviours that could be online banter or online bullying. For some of the scenarios, whether the behaviour is banter or bullying is clear, and in others it is more ambiguous.

There are 3 questions for each scenario:

1. How would the person delivering the banter know that it's become hurtful and therefore not banter?
2. How would the person experiencing it stand up for themselves and tell the person delivering the banter?
3. How would the bystanders be able to help?



Leave time at the end for feedback and for the young people to share their ideas and discuss.

Reminder: Please review the scenarios in the handout and slides before sharing them. Consider things like how age appropriate they are, if the names are the same as any young people in your group, or if similar things have happened. You may want to consider tweaking them or adding your own.

Display slide 17 – Who can you talk to?

The topic of bullying can be difficult for some young people to discuss. It's important to remind them that they will always find help at their school or setting. Remind them that they can always talk to anyone they trust, and any staff member they are comfortable talking to at school, but that the staff shown on the slides are always ready to listen.

It's always nice to end a serious topic with a positive note. Ask them to share what they enjoyed most about the session and what the positive message they're taking away from it.



ABOUT THE ANTI-BULLYING ALLIANCE

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) coordinates Anti-Bullying Week in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. We are a



unique coalition of organisations and individuals, working together to achieve our vision to: stop bullying and create safer environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play, and learn. We welcome membership from any organisation or individual that supports this vision and support a free network of thousands of schools and colleges

The ABA has three main areas of work:

1. Supporting learning and sharing best practice through membership
2. Raising awareness of bullying through Anti-Bullying Week and other coordinated, shared campaigns
3. Delivering programme work at a national and local level to help stop bullying and bring lasting change to children's lives

ABA is based at leading children's charity the National Children's Bureau.

While we provide these resources free of charge, we are in desperate need of donations to fund this work. As such, we ask you to consider making a donation to enable us to continue our work. Donate [HERE](#)



Our members are the lifeblood of the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) and we are always delighted when we receive new applications for membership. Please consider becoming a member [HERE](#)



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