Homophobic, Biphobic and Transphobic (HBT) Bullying among Disabled Children and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN): A Review of Literature

Neil Tippett PhD – June 2015

Executive Summary

Any form of difference, including being of a different gender, sexual orientation, or being a disabled person and/or having SEN, can increase the risk of children being bullied (Tippett, Houlston, & Smith, 2010). This kind of bullying is often directed at the real or perceived differences, and can lead to victims feeling isolated, abandoned, and struggling with self-confidence. Awareness of prejudiced forms of bullying, and the impact it has on victims, is generally increasing, however, some minority groups continue to be under-represented, both in research and social policy. One such group are disabled children and those with SEN, who tend to be defined on the basis of their disability or SEN, while their gender and sexual orientation get overlooked; despite this, disabled children and those with SEN experience the same sexual needs as their non-disabled peers, and are equally as likely to identify as gay or bisexual (Cheng & Udry, 2002). This review examines what is currently known about experiences of bullying among disabled children and those with SEN who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), and identifies areas which require further research, and potential avenues for intervention.

Prejudice based bullying

Compared to their peers, disabled children and those with SEN are twice as likely to report being bullied at school, and higher rates of victimisation have been found among children with learning disabilities, physical impairments, autism spectrum disorders, sensory impairments, and speech or language difficulties (McLaughlin, Byers, & Peppin Vaughan, 2010). Difficulties in socialising and communicating with others particularly increase the risk of being bullied, and can make it hard for disabled children and those with SEN to respond and cope with being bullied.

Homophobic, biphobic or transphobic (HBT) bullying is any form of bullying directed towards a person because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, or because of their association with people who are LGBT. HBT bullying is widespread in UK schools; over half of children who identify as LGBT have experienced bullying relating to their gender or sexuality (Guasp, 2012). Furthermore, homophobic language is used in schools on a regular basis, with many children not realising the offence it can cause, and few teachers punishing those who use it (Guasp, 2014).

HBT bullying among disabled children and those with SEN

The limited research available suggests that disabled children and those with SEN are at an increased risk of HBT bullying. A survey of UK LGBT youth found two thirds (66%) of disabled children and those with SEN had experienced homophobic bullying, compared to 55% among the sample as a whole (Guasp, 2012). Another study found that among LGBT adolescents in the US, almost 20% had been verbally bullied because of a real or perceived disability, and 7% physically harassed (Kosciw et al., 2014). Some smaller studies have also found that among victims of homophobic bullying, over a third reported being bullied because of a disability or SEN (Katz, 2009, 2011). To better understand the nature of HBT bullying and the impact it can have on disabled children and those with SEN, further research needs to focus on three key areas:

- **Type of bullying**: HBT bullying includes physical, verbal and relational behaviours, but can also involve unwanted sexual touching. We know disabled children and those with SEN are particularly vulnerable to experiencing sexual abuse. HBT bullying also happens across multiple contexts, including the school, home, in public, and online and there may be no safe place to hide.

- **Culture of silence**: One third of children do not tell anyone they are being bullied, and this figure is even higher among victims of HBT bullying (Rivers, 2011), who may not feel safe enough to talk about their experiences. Disabled children and those with SEN may struggle to cope with bullying, and in the case of with HBT bullying in particular, may not understand why they are being bullied, and may be unwilling or unable to discuss the problem with parents, friends, or teachers.

- **Impact on those who has been bullied**: All forms of bullying have a damaging and long term impact on the victim's physical and mental health, but HBT bullying alone can lead to poorer academic and mental health outcomes, including a greater risk of self-harming (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Disabled children and those with SEN are likely to

experience the same consequences of HBT bullying, and therefore require appropriate help and support to limit the damage that bullying can cause.

A whole school approach

As with all forms of prejudice related bullying, creating an inclusive environment is a major step in tackling HBT bullying among disabled children and those with SEN (Tippett et al., 2010). Achieving this requires a whole school approach, which can raise awareness of specific issues, and promote inclusion across all levels of the school community. Two aspects of the whole school approach may be particularly relevant:

1) **Anti-Bullying Policies** should explain what bullying is, how it is prevented and what action will be taken when it occurs, however, few policies refer to all forms of prejudiced related bullying (Smith et al., 2012). Making specific reference to HBT bullying, including that which is directed towards disabled children and those with SEN, can raise awareness and help prevent bullying before it happens.

2) **Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)** provides information and advice on sex, relationships and sexual health. Although it is provided to all disabled children and those with SEN, it largely focuses on heterosexuality and offers few chances for them to develop positive LGBT identities (Duke, 2011). SRE programmes that provide tailored and appropriate advice for disabled children and those with SEN, and are inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations, may be a potential route for reducing rates of HBT bullying, and can also help children cope with the effects of being bullied. We know that more disabled young people than non-disabled young people say they have not received any SRE.

Full Report

Over recent years, there has been a surge of research exploring the link between perceived difference and school bullying. The findings conclusively show that being of a different gender, sexual orientation, or being a disabled person and/or having SEN increases the risk of being victimised by peers (Tippett et al., 2010). Furthermore, this kind of victimisation will often focus specifically on the real or perceived differences, leading to victims feeling isolated, abandoned, and struggling with self-confidence. This review will focus on the experiences of bullying among disabled children and those with SEN who are, or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

A 'hidden minority'

Spanning two different minority groups, disabled children and those with SEN who identify as LGBT are in essence a minority within a minority (Fraley, Mona, & Theodore, 2007). In some cases they have been referred to as the 'hidden' or 'anonymous minority' (Duke, 2011). This is reflected in the lack of research and knowledge, with very little known about the experiences and challenges they encounter as they grow up (Duke, 2011; Harley et al., 2002).

There are several possible reasons why this group of children have been ignored. Firstly, belonging to a minority group has a strong effect on how others see that person. Both adults and children tend to categorise or label others on the basis of the most easily observable characteristics. Minority groups are seen as being mutually exclusive and unrelated (Harley et al., 2002); for example, a child is likely to be viewed as either being LGBT, or as having a SEN or a disability, but not both. As a result, they are likely to be defined on the basis of one aspect of their identity (e.g. their SEN or impairment), while other aspects (e.g. their gender or sexual orientation) may be overlooked.

Secondly, negative and inaccurate views have led to the sexual lives of disabled people being ignored (Esmail et al., 2010). One persistent myth has depicted disabled people, particularly those with physical disabilities, as asexual (Corker, 2001; Esmail et al., 2010), because they are either perceived as incapable of sexual intercourse, or are unlikely to find a romantic partner, therefore their sexual needs are absent or have been diminished (Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001). In addition, disabled people have historically been deterred from engaging in sexual behaviour (Blyth & Carson, 2007). This is due to both concerns that people with intellectual disabilities or mental health disorders lack the necessary social judgement to have sexual

relationships (Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001; Wissink et al., 2015), but also due to the vulnerability, and much increased risk, of disabled people experiencing sexual abuse and violence (Blyth & Carson, 2007; Jones et al., 2012).

Despite this, few differences have been found in the sexual lives and behaviours of disabled and non-disabled adolescents (Murphy & Young, 2005), who show the same pubertal and psychosocial development, experience the same sexual needs, and appear equally likely to be homosexual or bisexual (Cheng & Udry, 2002). Although there are no actual estimates, it has been suggested that 'LGBT students are present, in similar proportions, among disabled students as in other populations of students' (Harley et al., 2002); therefore it can be assumed that a significant proportion of disabled children and those with SEN identify as LGBT.

Targets for school bullying?

School bullying is a persistent problem in the UK. Up to 20% of children are bullied or bully others on a regular basis, and many more experience occasional acts of bullying (Smith, 2011), all of which can have a substantial negative impact on their health and well-being (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wolke et al., 2013). One of the main reasons that bullying occurs appears to be the desire for social dominance; children bully others as a way of increasing their social standing among their peers, and they achieve this by picking on targets that appear to be weaker than them, such as those that lack physical or mental strength, or have few friends that are able to defend them (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Reijntjes et al., 2013). The concept of difference plays a key role: children who are seen as different from their peers, such as due to their sexuality, or because of a SEN or impairment, can have a harder time fitting in, and may struggle to establish friendships with their peers, which can leave them especially vulnerable to being bullied (Tippett et al., 2010).

There is substantial evidence to show that disabled children and those with SEN are at greatly increased risk of being bullied by their peers (McLaughlin et al., 2010; Tippett et al., 2010). A recent survey of over 19,000 children living in the UK (Chatzitheochari, Parsons, & Platt, 2015) found that at the age of 7, 14% of children with a disability, 17% of children with SEN, and 20% of children with a statement of SEN were bullied "all of the time", compared to 8% of children without a disability or SEN. Among 15 year olds, similar results were found; those disabled young people, young people with SEN, or a statement of SEN, were around twice as likely to be frequently bullied, either physically or relationally, than their peers (10-13% compared to 6%). It is important to note that this study used very strict criteria for bullying; if occasional incidents were also counted, then it would be likely that the number of children

reporting being bullied would be significantly higher. All SEN and impairments can increase the risk of being bullied, including learning disability (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Mishna, 2003), physical impairments (Dawkins, 1996; Sweeting & West, 2001), autism spectrum disorders (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010), sensory impairments (Dixon, Smith, & Jenks, 2004; Nunes, Pretzlik, & Olsson, 2001), and speech or language difficulties (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Lindsay, Dockrell, & Mackie, 2008). Children's social skills and ability to communicate appear to be key factors, and can increase or decrease their vulnerability to bullying (McLaughlin et al., 2010). Difficulties understanding and communicating with others make it hard for disabled children and those with SEN to integrate and form positive relationships with their peers, leaving them isolated and exposed to bullying (Frederickson, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2010).

While most research attention has focused on general forms of bullying, there has been growing awareness of homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic (HBT) bullying, a specific type of bullying behaviour which is directed at a person 'because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, whether actual or perceived, or because of their association with people who are, or are perceived to be, gay, bisexual or transgender' (Mitchell, Gray, & Beninger, 2014). Estimates of HBT bullying suggest that it is widespread, and experienced by many LGBT children and young people (Tippett et al., 2010). Retrospective studies among LGBT adults have shown that up to 80% experienced some form of teasing as a child, much of which was related to their gender and sexual orientation (Rivers, 2001). A survey of 1,600 LGBT children in the UK, aged 11 to 19, found that over half had been victims of school bullying because of their gender or sexual orientation (Guasp, 2012). The more open pupils were about their sexuality, the greater the likelihood that they would be bullied. Similarly, a study of over 3,000 school aged children (Ditch the Label, 2015) found that while 39% of straight children reported being bullied, over 60% of gay children, and 75% of lesbian, bisexual, and asexual pupils had been victims of school bullying. A particularly troubling aspect of HBT bullying is the widespread use of homophobic terms among children. A survey of British school teachers found that around 90% of secondary school teachers, and 70% of primary school teachers heard pupils using homophobic expressions (Guasp, 2014). Worryingly, only half of teachers had challenged the use of this language. Thurlow (2001) suggests that homophobic language is used regularly by children, who do not realise that it may cause offence, and are unlikely to be punished for saying it.

HBT bullying of disabled children and those with SEN

At present there is almost no research which looks at experiences of HBT bullying among disabled children and those with SEN. A few studies do make some passing reference. One survey of over 7,000 LGBT adolescents in the US, found that 19.7% had been verbally harassed due to a real or perceived disability (5% often), while 7.6% had been physically harassed (1.7% often), and 4.1% physically assaulted (1.0% often) within the past year (Kosciw et al., 2014). It is unclear how many of these students were disabled and/or had SEN, however, over half of all respondents did not feel safe at school, and felt that being a disabled person further contributed towards their feelings of unsafety. Another study focused on experiences of bullying of 1,614 LGBT children in the UK, among whom, 18% had a disability or long-term physical or mental health issue (Guasp, 2012). Overall, just over half of all participants (55%) had experienced homophobic bullying, however, this rose to two-thirds (66%) among those pupils with a physical disability or long-term physical or mental health issue. Similarly, two reports on small samples of UK adolescents, found that among those who had experienced homophobic bullying, over one third reported that they had been bullied because of a disability (Katz, 2009, 2011). The author speculates that the use of homophobic language could be used as a proxy to bully disabled children and those with SEN, as to some it is seen as less offensive and easier to get away with than insults based on a child's impairment.

So far, the evidence is clearly limited, but indicates that disabled children and those with SEN may be at an increased risk of experiencing HBT bullying. Further research is required to better understand the nature and extent of this bullying, and in particular, three key questions need to be answered:

Firstly, what kind of HBT bullying do disabled children and those with SEN experience, and where does this happen?

HBT bullying can take multiple forms, including physical and verbal abuse, sexual assault, indirect and relational behaviour, such as rumour spreading and social exclusion, and the use of general homophobic language. The experiences of LGBT children suggest that verbal abuse and gossiping/rumour spreading are the most common (53 and 46% respectively), while up to a third also report being ignored or isolated and, 16% physically abused (Guasp, 2012). HBT bullying may also involve sexual behaviours, such as inappropriate touching (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2011; Guasp, 2012), which is of particular concern for disabled children and those with SEN, who are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse (Jones et al., 2012), and may

not understand issues of consent relating to sexual contact (McCabe, 1999). Furthermore, HBT bullying is not limited to the school environment. Almost one quarter of LGBT children have experienced HBT bullying online or through mobile phones (Guasp, 2012), and a survey of around 2,000 young people, found almost half had witnessed homophobic abuse and insults being used online (Aiden, Marston, & Perry, 2013). Mishna et al. (2009) found HBT bullying to be a pervasive and frequent occurrence across children's multiple contexts, including at school, at home, and in public, with many children having no safe place to escape. Whether disabled children and those with SEN experience HBT bullying similarly remains to be seen, and research is needed to determine not only what forms this bullying can take, but also whether they are also victimised in other contexts, including online, at home, or by strangers outside of the school environment.

Secondly, how do disabled children and those with SEN cope with the experience of HBT bullying?

Telling someone is perhaps the most effective strategy for stopping bullying, but at least one third of children who are bullied, do not tell anyone (Smith, 2011). Victims of HBT bullying may be even more reluctant to report bullying, either because they are not willing to discuss their sexuality, or because they do not wish to be perceived as LGBT (Guasp, 2012; Rivers, 2001). Some may also be scared of reporting bullying due to perceived homophobic attitudes of parents, teachers and friends (ChildLine, 2006), or because they believe it is unlikely that any action will be taken to stop it (Guasp, 2012). In some cases disabled children and those with SEN may have trouble recognising bullying and knowing the appropriate steps to take. Furthermore, some disabled children and those with SEN may attempt to cope by fighting back against those who have bullied them, a strategy that is often ineffective and can worsen the situation (Tippett et al., 2010). These problems could be compounded in the case of HBT bullying, as children may struggle to comprehend why they are being bullied, and may be unwilling or unable to discuss sexual issues, including their experiences of HBT bullying, with parents, teachers, or friends.

Thirdly, what are the consequences of HBT bullying for disabled children and those with SEN?

The experience of being bullied can have a profound impact on children's achievement, health and well-being (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wolke et al., 2013); however, there is evidence to suggest that bullying based on sexuality or disability can have a more detrimental effect than non-discriminatory forms of bullying (Russell et al., 2012). The impact of HBT bullying has

been independently linked with poorer educational outcomes, including lower academic achievement, and higher rates of truancy and school dropout (Kosciw et al., 2014; Poteat et al., 2011), as well as a range of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal and isolation, and a loss of self-esteem or confidence (Espelage et al., 2008; Rivers, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2009; Savin-Williams, 1994). These mental health outcomes may be further exacerbated for LGBT youth, who already have to deal with the complex issue of coming out (Mishna et al., 2009). There is also a much increased risk of self-harming, and suicidal ideation and behaviour among children who experience HBT bullying (Guasp, 2012; Rivers, 2011; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). In common with all victims, disabled children and those with SEN who are bullied are at much greater risk of developing physical and mental health problems, but the additional impact of HBT bullying may further exacerbate these issues. As with any victims, it is vital that disabled children and those with SEN are provided with the appropriate help and support to limit the damage that bullying can cause.

As the 'hidden minority' we know very little about the bullying experienced by disabled children and those with SEN who identify as or are perceived as being LGBT, and as result, it is difficult to know how often they are exposed to HBT bullying, and what impact it has on their health, well-being, and development. Further research is required which listens to the actual experiences of disabled children and those with SEN, so that rather than making assumptions on the basis of suppositions and inferences, our understanding of bullying is informed through the real life experiences and narratives of those who experience it. Understanding HBT bullying from the perspective of all disabled children and those with SEN is vital in developing effective interventions.

A whole school approach

While we continue to better understand how HBT bullying affects disabled children and those with SEN, it is important to start looking at ways in which the lives of these young people can be improved, and the risk of bullying reduced. As for any form of prejudice related bullying, creating inclusive environments, which acknowledge and welcome the differences in all of us, is perhaps the most important step (Tippett et al., 2010). Whole school approaches entail a range of activities aimed at raising awareness and promoting inclusion across the whole school community. These can include developing a positive school ethos; establishing and reviewing equal opportunity and anti-bullying policies; providing support and continuing professional development to all school staff, including training on how to deal with homophobia; offering support services for pupils to discuss issues safely and confidentially;

providing inclusive and informed sex and relationship education; widening the curriculum to include issues relating to prejudice; and ensuring that resources portray accurate depictions of different sexual orientations and genders (Aiden et al., 2013; Tippett et al., 2010; Warwick, Chase, & Aggleton, 2004). There is growing evidence that whole school approaches which raise awareness and promote inclusion across all levels of the school community can reduce rates of prejudiced or identity based bullying, including HBT and disablist bullying (Mitchell et al., 2014; Oftsed, 2012; Tippett et al., 2010), as well as limit the negative impact that it can have on victims (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). For disabled children and those with SEN specifically, two key areas of the whole school approach stand out among the research findings, and may provide the first steps towards preventing and reducing rates of HBT bullying:

School's Anti-Bullying Policies:

Anti-bullying policies form part of a whole school approach, and are a way of ensuring that all members of the school community understand what bullying is, and what action will be taken in the event of it happening (Smith et al., 2012). Schools are required under The Education and Inspections Act 2006 to outline what measures the school takes to prevent and respond to bullying in an anti-bullying or behaviour policy. Ofsted inspect and regulate services which care for children and young people, including schools. The revised Ofsted framework includes a strong focus on bullying with inspectors looking at schools' actions to tackle all forms of bullying and harassment, including cyber-bullying and prejudice-based bullying relating to special educational need, sexual orientation, sex, race, religion and belief, gender reassignment or disability. Despite these requirements, only a small proportion of schools have anti-bullying policies which refer to specific forms of bullying. A survey of LGBT children found that only 37% said their school had an anti-bullying policy that specifically stated that homophobic bullying was wrong (Guasp, 2012). Significantly more homophobic bullying was reported in those schools that did not make specific reference to it. Furthermore, an analysis of 217 primary and secondary schools policies by Smith et al. (2012), found that only 1 in 4 referred to homophobic bullying, and only 13% specifically mentioned bullying of disabled children and those with SEN. Significantly less bullying was found in schools that had wide ranging policies which included all forms of bullying (although it is likely these schools also had better developed whole school policies). Using anti-bullying policies to make students aware of HBT bullying, including when it is directed at disabled children and those with SEN, may be one way of preventing it before it happens.

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE):

SRE provides information and advice on sex, sexuality, relationships and sexual health to all children within the school community (Sex Education Forum, 2004). As part of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), schools need to ensure that SRE meets the needs of students with SEN and disabilities, and guidance recommends that staff provide additional and individual learning opportunities to ensure disabled children and those with SEN understand these issues fully (Mitchell et al., 2014). For disabled children and those with SEN, SRE can teach them about concepts of sexuality, sexual behaviour, and consent, thereby helping them to identify and deal with homophobic and sexually inappropriate behaviour. This is important for disabled children and young people who are more likely to experience sexual abuse and violence. Furthermore, SRE can offer a route through which disabled children and those with SEN are able to report bullying, while continuing to feel safe. In the UK, schools are able to choose what SRE is offered to students, therefore it is difficult to evaluate the provision of SRE generally; however, small sample studies in the UK and US suggest that SRE for disabled students and those with SEN is currently inadequate, focusing almost completely on heterosexuality (Blyth & Carson, 2007; Duke, 2011), excluding disabled children from some discussions (Berman et al., 1999), and offering few opportunities for them to develop positive LGBT identities (Blyth & Carson, 2007; Corker, 2001; Duke, 2011). Disabled children and those with SEN have the right to the same sex and relationship education as their peers, and Murphy and Young (2005) recommend that programs should be modified to make them more understandable, including by simplifying information, using special materials, and devising individualised education plans. Among disabled children and those with SEN, understanding issues of consent is strongly related to the sexual education they have received (McCabe, 1999), so programs should also focus on helping them to identify and respond to inappropriate sexual forms of HBT bullying. Recently, SRE has begun to receive significant attention, with the House of Commons Education Committee (2015) publishing a series of recommendations, and a governmental response to this expected later in the year. Although the evidence on its benefits is presently limited, inclusive SRE may be a potential route for reducing rates of HBT bullying directed at disabled children and those with SEN.

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