Preventing bullying: a guide for teaching assistants

SEN and disability: developing effective anti-bullying practice

Introduction

This guide is based on the views of children and young people, who receive support from teaching assistants, about bullying. It is designed to give teaching assistants advice on preventing bullying of disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN).

This guide forms part of a wider programme of work from the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) aimed at reducing the bullying of disabled children and young people and those with SEN. There are lots and lots of further resources on our website to support you. ABA also has free online training available covering this very issue and you're very welcome to complete this. Find out more at www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/send-programme.
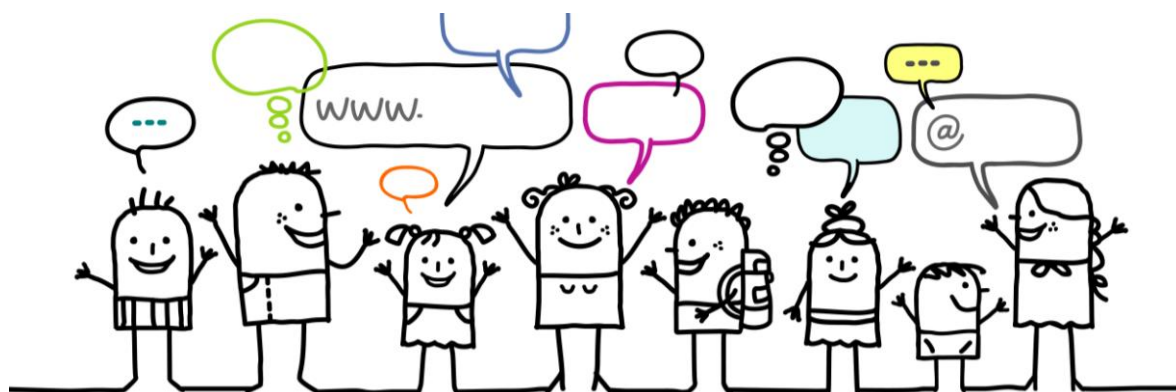
N.B. on terminology: For ease and clarity:

- TA (Teaching assistant) is used throughout the guide to refer to TAs, LSAs (learning support assistants) and other forms of learning support for children and young people in schools.
- The term 'young people' is used to refer to children and young people.
- The term 'disabled young people' is used to refer to disabled young people and those who have SEN.

We would like to thank all those young people who contributed their views to our research for this guide. This guide was written by Kate Martin of Common Room Consulting Limited.

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1. What do we know about bullying for disabled young people?

"Contextual factors – including staff support, poorly differentiated classroom activity, and separate teaching – may mean young people with SEN and/or disabilities do not have the right opportunities to forge social links with their peers that may protect them from bullying."[1]

What is bullying?

It is important that when thinking about cyberbullying we have a full understanding of the definition of bullying. The Anti-Bullying Alliance (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. It can happen face-to-face or through cyberspace."**

Are disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN) more likely to experience bullying in school?

Studies show that young people who are disabled and/or have special educational needs are more likely to be bullied than others. Research from 2014 has indicated that disabled primary school pupils are twice as likely as other pupils to suffer from persistent bullying. Reports suggest that bullying may have been experienced by:

- Roughly 8 out of 10 young people with learning difficulties

- 82% of young people who are disfluent (those with a stammer), 91% of these by namecalling

- 39% of children with speech and language difficulties

- Over 90% of parents of children with Asperger Syndrome reported that their child had been bullied in the previous 12 months alone

- At age 7, 12% of children with special needs and 11% of those with a statement said they were bullied 'all of the time' by other pupils, compared to just 6% of their non-disabled peers

- 61.5 % of those with mental health problems reported being bullied, with 62.5 per cent of bullied participants reporting that being bullied was an important reason for their attendance at the CAMH service[2]

Disabled children and young people are more likely to experience relational bullying, including isolation and exclusion. We know that the best protective factors from bullying is social support from friendships and peer relationships yet there are many factors which impact on this for disabled children and young people. These issues include:[3]

- Spending a of time with staff

- Being isolated by being taught away from their peer group or having LSA support in class

- A lack of social opportunities or support promote and sustain friendships

These factors can isolate disabled young people and make it more difficult for them to develop friendships and relationships with their peers. This can increase the likelihood of disabled young people experiencing bullying.

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[1] Perspectives on bullying and difference: Byers, McLaughlin and Peppin-Vaughan, 2012
[2] http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/research/key-statistics/
[3] Perspectives on bullying and difference: Byers, McLaughlin and Peppin-Vaughan, 2012

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This guide discusses young people's views on

- good support from TAs
- bullying experienced by children and young people who receive TA support in schools
- what can be done to prevent bullying for children and young people who receive TA support in schools

The importance of good support for children and young people

- "Primary school was fine, I had a one to one TA. She was like my second mum. She really helped me through school. No problems. Everyone understood and accepted why I had a TA."
- "She became part of the class. She was able to help others, not just for me."
- "When I know there are teaching assistants close by, I do feel better."
- "Can be easy to talk to someone you spend a lot of time with."

Disabled young people spoke about how important the support from TA was for them. They said having TA support

- made sure they could access school and learning in the same way as their peers.
- helped them to feel more comfortable and confident

Many disabled young people also talked about how supportive their TAs had been when they were being bullied. They said

- they spoke to their TAs about bullying, as it was easier to talk to someone they knew well
- it was good to have someone who you trusted and knew well that you could go to and would help you to monitor the bullying

Disabled young people said that for support from TAs to be good, it needed to:

- be adapted to the individual young person and their preferences
- focus on how the support is provided
- enhance inclusion
- encourage young people's friendships and peer relationships
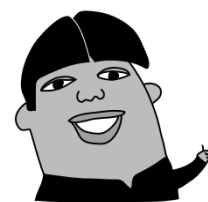
The views of disabled young people about bullying

- "It was like it was my fault for needing help, not their fault for bullying me."

Whilst many disabled young people valued the support they receive from their TAs, they also talked about

- the difficulties having support from an adult could cause
- experiences of being bullied
- the difficulties for teaching assistants to respond to bullying
- not being believed and poor responses to bullying from schools

2. The difficulties experienced by young people who receive adult support in schools

Assumptions that having support reduces the likelihood of bullying

> - "It often happens when teaching assistants are not around."
> - "They fobbed it off as friendship issues… 'oh it'll iron itself out'"
> - "Listen more to when people say bad things, and don't just tell us to ignore it but tell them to stop saying things too."

Young people said that there were sometimes assumptions that having support

- made bullying less likely
- would make bullying easier to identify as there was increased adult supervision

However, they said bullying usually happened when TAs or other adults were not around. They felt that this meant there could be a lack of understanding about the levels and impact of bullying for disabled young people.

They also felt this could affect whether they were believed when they reported bullying. Some young people talked about not being believed or the seriousness of the bullying was not recognised.

The impact of support on developing friendships

> - "Having teaching support was a double edged sword. You need them - I needed them to help me write, help me around the school. But it was a double-edged sword, but then I started to rely on them. They became my friends because of other kids started to ignore me."

Whilst many young people valued the support they received, many felt that this impacted on their ability to develop friendships with their peers.

They felt that their support wasn't always adapted to their needs and they received support at times when they didn't need it. This could separate them from their peers. For example,

- many young people said they mainly worked with their TA on a one-to-one basis in class, rather than being given support to work with their peers or in small groups
- other young people said they were given TA support during break times, even when they didn't need this
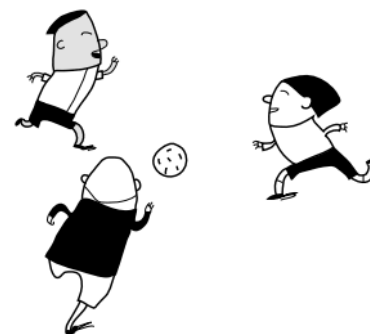
This impacted on their ability to work and spend time with their peers. They felt having an adult around too much (in classrooms or break times), prevented them from forming friendships or stopped other young people wanting to spend time with them.

> - "Inclusion is important because if you're excluded from the rest of the group it marks you as the odd one out, so you're more of a target for bullies"

When support separated young people from their peers this made them feel excluded and different, rather than included. They felt this made them more likely to be bullied by other young people.

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Young people stressed the importance of TAs 'dipping in and out' – of providing support when it was needed and moving away when it wasn't.

> - "If someone has a learning difficulty, they might only need someone in the classroom. Not all the time."
>
> - "Not always be around us, because that doesn't look normal. Give us space when we don't need support."

Isolation and exclusion

One of the main forms of bullying disabled young people talked about was exclusion and isolation.

> - "I wanted, at the start [of secondary school] to have as much support as possible. I'd come from a really supportive primary school, where it was ok [to have TA support]. But as time went on, things got worse. They [other students] weren't up front with me. They just excluded me, isolated me."
>
> - "It was so subtle, it made me paranoid. That made it even worse because then they picked up on that."

Exclusion and isolation had a significant impact on young people. Many said they had isolated themselves at breaks and lunchtimes, as they had no friends or social opportunities. Some young people talked about spending most of their break and lunch times with the TAs as they had no one else to spend time with.

> - "I started to go an sit in the learning support area."
>
> - "I wouldn't go out and play. I'd stay away from the other kids. I'd rely on the LSAs at lunch and break times. I didn't feel comfortable once I got bullied."
>
> - "They did try and help me to work in groups, but my LSA was still very involved as I needed support with writing. I went through a stage where I did all group work with my LSA, because of the exclusion and isolation."

Many of the young people felt this was due to having limited opportunities to make friends and other young people not wanting to spend time with them because they always had an adult around. They also felt this was affected by the attitudes of other young people, which included:

- poor attitudes towards disability

- not valuing and respecting difference

- a lack of understanding about why some young people may need support

> - "Because there is always someone sat near you when you are doing your work. They laugh at you. Because someone is sat with you all the time."
>
> - "They [other young people] might not understand why. Might not understand that it's ok to have support."

Jealousy

Disabled young people felt this lack of understanding meant other students got jealous and thought they were getting preferential treatment.

- "Year 7 was OK… I was a novelty really at first. I had an electric wheelchair. I could leave lessons early to get to the next class. Leave for lunch early to beat the rush. I was allowed to take a friend with me. I think the novelty wore off. I had a lot of support. They got jealous."

- "It stems from the fact they were jealous. They didn't understand my needs. They thought I was getting preferential treatment."

Lack of understanding / feeling different

Disabled young people felt that often other students did not understand or respect the reasons why they had support from a TA

- "[They bully you] because they think you can't do it on your own."

- "They think you're different because you need support. They [other students] need help to understand why."

- "If they're not explained it [disability]… they won't understand it."

- "They [teachers and TAs] can be patronising. I don't think they mean too or sometimes I don't think they know they're doing it. Makes you feel frustrated. Make someone more of a target. Make them look odd when they're not."

Lack of response from the school

Another key issue identified by young people was a lack of an effective response to bullying by the school.

Young people said that when they had reported bullying, there had been no effective response or action taken:

- "They just say write it down. I was like, 'what… do you want me to write 10 essays'? I probably could have done, there was so much going on'."

- "They say write it down, and I'm like… 'Again? Do you want the whole back catalogue?'"

- "If nothing happens, makes you feel like you're not worth doing anything about."

- "Not cared for, like they don't care enough to stop it. Angry."

They also talked about responses that focussed on the young person being bullied rather than the young people who were bullying them. For example, one young person said the response was to remove them from their tutor group. This led young people to feeling even more isolated or as if the bullying was their fault.

- "They didn't do anything to the bully. They made me write everything down. They said I could leave class if I needed to. I had a special card where I could write down I was feeling. But this made me feel like I was the one with a problem. They did nothing to the bullies. I don't know how many times I went to my head of year."

- "They finally did something. They removed me from my tutor group. I was taken out of the class and put in a new one. It was me that had to change, not them."

Even when bullying incidents were responded to, the response did not include support to tackle the exclusion or lack of peer relationships for the young person, meaning they still felt isolated.

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The impact of bullying on other students

> - "I've had people saying sorry… they could see what was going on but they didn't know what to do or how to help. They were worried about being bullied too. They needed help or encouragement as well."
>
> - "Other class mates… feel awkward too. Horrible to see, but don't know what to do. Feel bad for them. But if the teachers or TA do nothing… then they [classmates] don't do anything either. Powerless."

Disabled young people talked students who witness bullying. They felt:

- this was often difficult for them to witness

- that they often felt helpless or powerless to intervene

- that support should be provided for other pupils so they what they can do if they see someone being bullied

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3. Challenges for teaching assistants

As well as the difficulties for young people who are being bullied, young people also identified how difficult bullying situations can be for teaching assistants.

> - "They could see what was happening, but I think it was very difficult for them. I think they thought if they got too involved it could make things worse, they didn't want to make it more difficult for me to make friends. They were a great support, they came to meetings with me with my head of year."
> - "They knew what was going on. I'd talk to them and get upset with them. They just didn't know what to do. I think they felt powerless."

Young people felt that TAs could be a great support when someone is being bullied. They gave many examples of TAs helping them to report bullying and being a trusted adult they could talk to. However, they often felt that TAs themselves were sometimes not listened to by other staff or did not know what to do about bullying. Young people felt that TAs might not feel like they could do anything to tackle bullying or might not want to make it worse by intervening. Young people recognised how difficult this could be for TAs.

> - "They did alert my head of year."
> - "Told to ignore it."
> - "[The TA probably felt] awkward, they didn't really know what to do. Wanted to the best but didn't know how."
> - "[They] might not know what to do about bullying. Their job is to help you with your work but not other things. They helped my learning needs but they didn't know what to do about bullying."
> - "They might not have been trained about bullying."
> - "[The TA] felt bad because they didn't know what to do."
> - "They need to be helped to know the signs of bullying and what to do about it. They need to be listened to as well [when they report a young person is being bullied]!"

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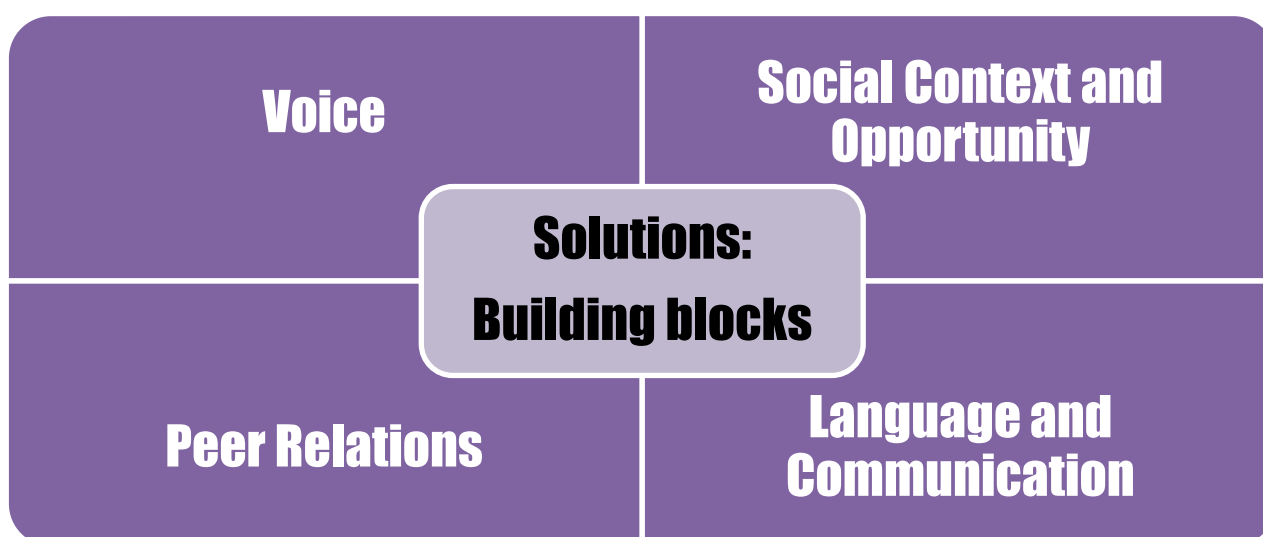developing effective anti-bullying practice

4. What can be done to prevent bullying?

The focus of this guide is on addressing the underlying issues that make bullying more likely for disabled young people who get adult support in school. This is because we know that:

- young people who receive adult support are more likely to be bullied

- receiving adult support can make it more difficult for young people to develop and maintain friendships

- A lack of friendships and peer support increase the likelihood of bullying

- Bullying for disabled young people is often relational and they experience high levels of exclusion and isolation

- Friendships, peer relationships and social opportunities are the best way of preventing bullying and these should be at the heart of a strategy to prevent bullying for disabled young people.

This section:

- Looks at the key building blocks for developing a prevention strategy, which are voice; social context and opportunity; peer relations; and language and communication. These should inform and underpin all approaches aimed at preventing bullying.

- Gives practical advice from disabled young people about the key areas of a prevention strategy:

  - Whole school approaches
  - Classroom strategies
  - Playground strategies
  - Peer support
  - Values and attitudes
  - Voice

Voice	**Social Context and Opportunity**
Solutions: **Building blocks**	
Peer Relations	**Language and Communication**

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Building blocks

To effectively prevent bullying for disabled young people, we need to challenge the barriers to safety they experience in school settings. This moves us away from thinking about disabled young people being 'vulnerable' to bullying because of their impairment or learning needs. It means we need to identify and remove the barriers to safety disabled young people experience. We need to think about how the ways we support disabled young people in school can increase or decrease their likelihood of being bullied.

For example, we know that receiving adult support can make it more difficult for disabled young people to make and maintain friendships. This can make young people isolated and being isolated can make bullying more likely. We therefore need to think about *how* support enables young people to develop and maintain friendships, enables them to work with their peers, rather than be isolated from them.

The key building blocks to removing barriers to safety and preventing bullying are:

- Voice
- Social context and opportunity
- Peer relations
- Language and communication

Voice: Involving disabled young people in planning ways to prevent bullying, planning responses and monitoring bullying situations to their conclusion

> - "Listen to us. If you're getting support, review how things are going, what's going well, what needs to change, how is it affecting friendships, how included or isolated they feel."

As well as planning ways to prevent and respond to bullying, disabled young people want to be fully involved in planning what support they receive and how they are supported. This includes reviewing how the support they receive is affecting their peer relationships, friendships, how support is making them feel included or isolated, for example.

Social context and opportunity: How can we enhance the social context to ensure disabled young people have good social opportunities within the setting?

> - "Break times. Time with friends. Important."
> - "Introduce us to other students. We can make different friends."
> - "Have clubs at break and invite all the students so we can mix with other people and not just our classmates."
> - "I think they just need to be there, give them support when needed, but acknowledge that it can be difficult for young people to make friends."

Good friendships and peer relationships are a key protective factor against bullying. How does the setting support disabled young people to develop and maintain friendships and have good social opportunities? How does the support provided to young people encourage and support good social opportunities and peer relationships?

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Peer relations: Peer relations are at the heart of bullying, it's prevention and responses. How can we enhance peer support? How can we promote positive attitudes to disability?

> ▪ "Make sure supporting peer relationships is in the young persons plan. Develop plan with friends, family, young person."

How can we develop peer support within the setting? How can we promote positive attitudes to disabled? How can we embed supporting peer relationships in planning with disabled young people?

Language and communication: is at the heart of tackling bullying for disabled young people

How can we hear verbal and non-verbal cues a young person is distressed, isolated or being bullied? How can we support disabled young people to understand bullying, know what their rights are and who they can talk to?

> ▪ "Make sure young people know what bullying is."
>
> ▪ "Have a trusted person to talk to… someone the young person can contact and feels safe to talk to about bullying."
>
> ▪ "Check in with us regularly to see how things are going and so we know you're there for us."

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5.Strategies

Developing good prevention strategies means being proactive and planning activity that will reduce the likelihood of bullying. These strategies should put the four building blocks into practice and should cover:

- Whole school approaches
- Classroom strategies
- Playground strategies
- Peer support strategies

Here are some ideas from disabled young people about could be done!

Whole school approaches: What should the school do to make sure teaching assistants provide the best support they can to children and young people?

Young people's suggestions for whole school approaches included:

- Acknowledge that bullying happens and is more likely for young people who receive adult support.

- Bullying needs to be recognised in the schools inclusion and support policies. This should make it clear that having adult support can make bullying more likely and should promote that support needs to enhance peer relationships.

- All school staff, including teachers, TAs and playground staff should be training in bullying and how to make sure support enhances young people's peer relationships and inclusion.

- Understand the importance of the role of TAs. They have significant knowledge of young people. Make sure their input is valued and they are involved in planning approaches to preventing and responding to bullying, as well as children and young people.

- Make sure there are clear processes to support TAs to respond to bullying and to know who they should report bullying to.

- Training for TAs (and other school staff) should be delivered with disabled young people and disabled adults, so they can learn from people's personal experience of what it is like to be supported.

- Survey all young people about bullying. Ask where and why bullying happens bullying happens to get a better idea of what is happening across the school. This is helpful for young people who may not want to speak up. Compare the answers from young people who get adult support with those who don't… are there any differences?

- Have staff and teaching assistants who are disabled to be positive role models in the school.

Classroom strategies: What practical things can the teaching assistant do to support young people to be included and to prevent bullying from happening?

- "I like being in groups. I'm quite sociable. I had a few teaching assistants at school. I was encouraged to do group work."

- "My teaching assistant… she.. well, we all usually sat in the same places. So, even though she was my TA, she kind of worked with us all as a small group. Made me feel more included."

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> - "The thing is though, perhaps they really want to be included but in a way that works for them. Instead of maybe one big group in a class, put people into smaller groups. Help the young person with a TA be with other young people they are confortable with."
> - "Sometimes teaching assistants will keep asking us things, but other students don't keep getting told to do things, so I would like to be like that and just do things at my own pace."
> - "It can help other young people too… that happened to me in science class. My TA helped the other young people in our small group too. It was good for them too. "
> - "The TA would give you support when you need it… let you go solo when you don't. Now, as and when I need help I'll let them know. Otherwise, they sit back or work with other students."

Top tips from disabled young people included:

- 'Dip in and out': give us support when we need it but move away when we don't

- Encourage our independence. Make sure we have time with our peers wherever possible.

- Work with children and young people in small groups, rather than one-to-one, where possible.

- Let us signal when we need or want support, rather than being with us all of the time.

Playground: What practical things can teaching assistants do in the playground to make young people feel included and to stop bullying happening?

Top tips from young people included:

- Talk to us and help us to identify people who can be friends or peer supporters. This can be better than having an adult around.

- You can support us from a distance at play times, so that we can have time alone with our friends, but signal if we need you.

- If you see young people who are isolated, try initiating a group activity, and then move away once they are playing together.

Peer support - how can children and young people develop friendships with their peers?

- Remember, we can be peer mentors too!

- Enable us to work and spend time with other students, rather than work separately or be taught outside of our peer group.

- Talk to young people and see if they would like a peer supporter.

- Make sure we join in and activities with other students wherever possible

- What social opportunities or groups are there at breaks and lunchtimes that we could go to? This is important if a young person is feeling isolated.

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Values and attitudes: How does everyone in the school value difference and understand that teaching assistant support is there to empower children and young people?

- "Other young people need to learn."

- "You have to look at it through the pupils eyes. If you're 'different' the outside world will look at you as different, but you look at yourself as being the same. Need empathy for the young person."

- "Support needs to make someone feel included not excluded. Part of their peer group, not separate, that they get to lead their help and support so it fits what they want and need, rather than what people think they need."

Top tips from young people included:

- It's important to value and understand disability and difference.

- It's important that other young people understand the role of TAs and support. They need to know this is a right, not preferential treatment.

Voice

- "Talking about it with students… they know what's happening. Get students who have support to talk with teachers, teaching assistants all together."

- "I find group work in a school situation quite stressful, so working away from the peer group is good for me"

- "If we're talking about the whole TA pupil thing, then it's important that at the beginning of the year to, like, discuss and plan it with the young person. Like with me, when I went into 6th form I had, erm, a quite long and lengthy meeting with teachers in the school who were going to be teaching me, and a couple of the TAs. We talked over the best way to strategically manage my course. It's been really successful."

Top tips from disabled young people included:

- Listen to us!!

- Make sure we are involved in…

  - planning our support

  - reviewing our support. Ask us how are things going? What's working? What needs adjusting?

  - check in about bullying and how are peer relationships are.

... Listen to all your students.

- "If things aren't going so well, discussing with us why things aren't going so well"

- "Always get the views of the person you are working with about how they want to be supported."

- "Sit down and have a chat about what's going well, what's making it go well, what's not going well, what you need to change."

- "We could have meetings with people from the college other students and teaching assistant and tell each other what we think is good and bad to help make things better for everyone."

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