

# SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO BULLY:

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## A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE STAFF

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**NATIONAL  
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## INTRODUCTION

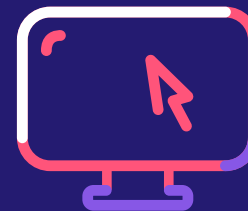
There are many tools and resources available for schools about how to prevent and respond to bullying incidence in schools. There is, however, very little guidance available about how to support children who display bullying behaviour. We hope this guide will help you to do this. In late 2020, we consulted with young people about how to support young people who bully. We have combined their views with the available academic research and our anti-bullying expertise to develop this guidance. In this document we may refer to schools but this guide could also be applied to other settings for children and young people. The quotes from this guide were taken directly from the young people we consulted with.

Before getting started, it's important to have a good understanding of what bullying is. There is no legal definition of bullying although there are a number of agreed elements that academics and organisation say constitutes bullying. They are included in our ABA agreed definition of bullying:



**Bullying is:**

**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 online.**



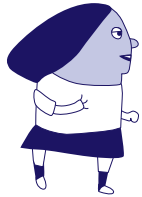
You can find out more about the definition of bullying [HERE](#) and take our **free CPD online training** about bullying.

We welcome any feedback about how you have used this tool and any suggestions for changes. Please email your comments/suggestions to [aba@ncb.org.uk](mailto:aba@ncb.org.uk).

# HOW MANY CHILDREN BULLY AND WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THEM?

Any person is capable of displaying bullying behaviour. It is important to ensure we don't make assumptions about children who are bullying others.

Ditch the Label's research shows that 3% of children admit to bullying others when asked directly<sup>1</sup>. However, in our survey of 28 thousand children and young people through our All Together anti-bullying programme, we asked children about the behaviours they display rather than directly asking about bullying. These responses were analysed by Goldsmith's University<sup>2</sup>. They found that:



43%

of children had bullied others occasionally



8%

of children reported bullying others frequently

Our research also found that:



Boys are more likely to bully others with **49%** of boys compared to **36%** of girls reported bullying behaviour (frequently or occasionally)

## SEND

Children with SEND are slightly more likely to bullying others (**46%**) compared to those without SEND (42%)



The most common types of bullying are **name calling** and teasing



Children who bully others just as likely to **have poor wellbeing** as those who are being bullied



## Remember:

Whilst there is evidence to suggest children with **SEND** are slightly more likely to display bullying behaviour than their peers, it is also important to remember that evidence shows children with SEND are twice as likely to experience bullying than their peers.<sup>1,2</sup>

Anyone is capable of displaying bullying behaviours and there is not a significant amount of research relating to the common behaviours that children who bully exhibit but research shows<sup>3</sup> that children who bully are more likely to:

- Find challenges to their self-esteem difficult to handle
- Show moral disengagement – separating themselves from the impact of their actions or minimising their role
- Have lower empathy
- Have poorer communication with parents and experiencing bullying from family members
- Be seen by others as powerful and having high status



There is some research<sup>4</sup> that shows that there might be three different kinds of personality traits prevalent among children that bully:

1. Popular and socially intelligent
2. Relatively popular and average social intelligence
3. Unpopular and lower than average social intelligence (the smallest group in numbers)

## Bully-victims

The research term 'bully-victim' describes young people who both bully and are bullied. It is not known what percentage of children are bully-victims. Research shows that bully-victims may have the poorest outcomes. For example, they are more likely to experience anxiety and depression<sup>5</sup>. They may be more likely to fall into the 3rd group listed above where they lack popularity and social intelligence<sup>6</sup>.

1 – The Annual Bullying Survey 2020 – Ditch the Label. <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-Annual-Bullying-Survey-2020-2.pdf>  
2 – Interim evaluation report on bullying and wellbeing from the All Together Programme (2020) – Susanne Robinson, Robert Slonje, and Peter K. Smith. [http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/All%20Together%20Phase%201%20Evaluation%202020\\_0.pdf](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/All%20Together%20Phase%201%20Evaluation%202020_0.pdf)  
2.2 – 'Bullying experiences among disabled children and young people in England: Evidence from two longitudinal studies – Institute of Education (2014)' and the link <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEC/pdf/qsswp1411.pdf>  
3 – The Psychology of School Bullying – Dr Peter K. Smith (The Psychology of Everything – Routledge) (2019)  
4 – Cross, D., Monks, H., Hall, M., Shaw, T., Pintabona, Y., Erceg, E., et al. (2011). Three year results of the friendly schools whole of school intervention on children's bullying behaviour. British Educational Research Journal, 37, 105–129.  
5 – Ford R, King T, Priest N, Kavanagh A. 2017. Bullying and mental health and suicidal behaviour among 14- to 15-year-olds in a representative sample of Australian children. Aust N Z J Psychiatry, 51(9):897–908.  
6 – A developmental perspective on popularity and the group process of bullying – J. Loes Pouwels, Tessa A.M. Lansua, Antonius H.N. Cillessena (2018)

## CONSIDER YOUR SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Whilst it is important to understand the characteristics of the children that are bullying in your school, it is just as important to consider the characteristics of the school environment. For example, are there areas of the school that are under supervised such as home to school transport or toilet areas? Does your school policy outline expectations relating to how we treat each other well enough and are these modelled by all staff in school? Do you have any issues with discriminatory or derogatory use of language?

## BULLYING IS A GROUP BEHAVIOUR

Research undertaken in Finland by Christina Salmivalli (1996) gave us a greater understanding of the roles involved in bullying. It showed that the traditional view of bullying where there is a 'victim' and a 'bully' was much more complicated. We have taken and developed these roles:

### The roles involved in bullying

#### OUTSIDER



The **Outsider** ignores or doesn't see the bullying and doesn't want to get involved.

#### TARGET

The **Target** is the person at whom the bullying is aimed at.



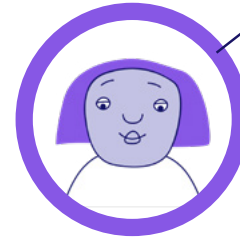
#### RINGLEADER



The **Ringleader** initiates and leads the bullying.

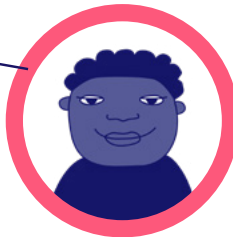
#### REINFORCER

The **Reinforcer** supports the bullying, might laugh or encourage what's going on but doesn't 'do' it.



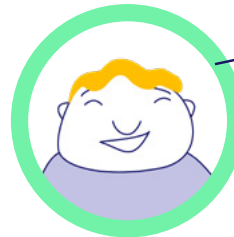
#### DEFENDER

The **Defender** stands up for someone being bullied. Knows that bullying is wrong and feels confident enough to defend. They might talk to an adult in school.



#### ASSISTANT

The **Assistant** is actively involved in 'doing' the bullying. But does not lead it.



## BULLYING IS A BEHAVIOUR CHOICE, NOT SOMETHING YOU ARE

It is important to not label individual children and **we recommend to avoid using the term 'bully' to describe children who are displaying bullying behaviour.** There are a number of reasons for this.

- It implies to children that it is what they are rather than something they choose to do.
- It is often used as a pejorative term among children and young people and can be unhelpful.

The term victim is problematic – it can mean different things to different people. Because of this, ABA recommends that schools use the term 'child who has been bullied', or 'target of bullying'.



"The people around him are encouraging him. The other pupils are being complacent. Someone needs to stand up and be a defender."

– young person

"A lot of people fear that if they don't do what they need to do to fit in they won't be cool and they'll be disliked"

– young person



These roles are not static. Children and adults can play different roles depending on the situation they are in.

Bullying is seen to be a group phenomenon. Others can have a significant influence on the outcomes of behaviours in school either intentionally or otherwise. By utilising these roles and encouraging other options, such as not laughing along or checking in after the incident to say that you will help a target to report, you can have a positive affect on bullying incidents.

For children that are bullying, they can often feel very stuck in their negative and hurtful behaviour. They can feel trapped in a cycle themselves and find it hard to see how they are able to change. They may, for example, be trying to 'impress' other children or have experienced bullying themselves. It is therefore often helpful to look at the wider group when developing responses to bullying.

Ask yourself a key question:

**What / who is incentivising the ringleader to continue their behaviour?**



### Take the below example of Priti and Tyler

Priti has been calling Tyler unkind names ever since he made a mistake when reading out loud in an English class. Every time Priti does this, a group of 3 children who are friends with them laugh along and sometimes join in. As well as engaging with Priti about her behaviour, what else could help to remove the power that Priti feels when she bullies Tyler? Each time the children laugh along, they give positive affirmations to Priti to continue the bullying.

Could you work with those children about understanding how Tyler feels when he's bullied in this way and encourage them to stop bullying? This may give Priti less reason to continue her behaviour and Tyler may feel more empowered to stand up for himself.



## WORKING WITH PARENTS AND CARERS

When parents find out that their child is bullying others, it can release a range of feelings including guilt, denial, worry and anger. Sometimes these emotions can cause issues with engaging with schools and parents can feel defensive.

Here are four key tips that we hope will help you engage with parents and carers whose children might be displaying bullying behaviour:

1. Remember to not call any child a 'bully'. This is unhelpful and can make parents feel defensive. Instead acknowledge that they are displaying some unkind and bullying behaviour and you want to work with them to try to come up with a solution.
2. Be clear that this is what you think has happened rather than 100% facts. You may not be aware of everything that has taken place so ensure you show parents that you are open minded and not jumping to conclusions.
3. Acknowledge that this is not easy to hear and that you are resolved to come up with solutions to make things better for everyone.
4. Be clear about your school policies, expectations about how children should be treating others and what needs to change.



Here are some tips for parents and carers when they find out their child might be bullying others. You might want to share this with parents and carers you work with:



## SOME TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS OF CHILDREN WHO MIGHT BE BULLYING OTHERS

From the



**If your child has been accused of bullying others, stay calm. It's not an easy thing to hear but we've got some tips to help you. And remember, bullying is a behaviour and not something that someone inherently is.**

Make sure your child knows what bullying behaviour is and why it is wrong



Make sure your child knows they can talk to you, or to another adult if they are worried about bullying



Help your child to realise that no one has the right to pressure them into something they don't want to do – this includes bullying others



Make sure they are not bullying others in retaliation for bullying they have suffered – find out if there is a wider culture of bullying in the school or environment where it's happened



Talk to your child about information that is shared through social networking sites – let them know



that they shouldn't upload comments or images that could hurt someone else – or pass on content that is designed to hurt someone else. Let them know most social networking sites have report buttons if they have seen bullying behaviour and they want to stop it.

Make it clear that you do not tolerate the use of disrespectful and hurtful language and behaviour as a family (it's vital that you model this as parents)



The anti-bullying charity, Kidscape, have a parent helpline. Find out more at

[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)

## A PUNITIVE OR RESTORATIVE APPROACH?

A question we ask ourselves a lot: To punish or support children to understand the impact of their actions? The academic research shows that both a punitive approach (i.e. an approach that focuses on punishments such as detentions) and restorative approach (i.e. where the focus is on working with those involved to repair the harm that has been done) have a similar levels of efficacy. They prove to be effective in 70–80% of cases<sup>7</sup>. However, after extensive consultation with young people over a number of years at the Anti-Bullying Alliance, we know that the majority of young people prefer a restorative approach that targets getting to the cause of the bullying behaviour and repairing relationships over a punitive, sanction-based response. This is for a number of reasons:

1. Children worry that simply being told off, given detentions and being given fixed term exclusions does not get to the cause of the reason why those children are being bullied.
2. Children worry a sanction focused response can make children who bully feel aggrieved and angrier at their targets.
3. They want to have repaired relationships. Often, they are not focused on the 'rights and wrongs' of incidents and more focused on repairing the relationships involved and being able to move on.
4. Children are often acutely aware that children might be bullying for reasons of adversity they might be facing. For example, are they being bullied themselves? Are they having a hard time at school?

Whilst the young people we spoke to are clear they prefer restorative approaches to bullying, it was also clear that schools don't always do this well. Some talked about being brought together with the person that bullied them and it being quite uncomfortable and in some cases intimidating.

We have lots of information about implementing restorative approaches to bullying and organisations, such as Restorative Thinking, [on our website](#).

“It is very difficult to do well”  
– young person

“bringing those people [bully and bullied] together to talk together might open up an understanding and a mutual respect for each other”  
– young person

7 – Change Starts With Us: A literature review about what works to prevent and respond to bullying face to face and online? – Anti-Bullying Alliance – Dr Peter Smith, Goldsmiths University (2019) [http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Literature\\_Review%203\\_0.pdf](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Literature_Review%203_0.pdf)

# WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE BULLYING

We've created some tips about how you can start to talk to young people who bully about their behaviour. You might want to use this in conjunction with our guidance about developing a response to bullying incidents.



[ABA Responding to Bullying Incidents: a tool for schools](#)

## Clear expectations

Set out the clear expectations you have as a school about how we treat others. Ask if they are aware of them. Hopefully you have done lots of work about making that clear to all pupils before this incident but this can serve as a reminder. Be clear where behaviour hasn't met those expectations. For example, be clear that whilst we don't all have to be best friends with each other or agree with each other, it's never an excuse to bully someone or treat them unkindly.



## Try to help children who are bullying to consider the impact on those they are bullying

As discussed, there is research that children that bully may not have as high levels of empathy as other children. In the first meetings with them it's unlikely to be pertinent to bring the target and ringleaders together to discuss the impact of the ringleader's actions but use your first meetings to ascertain how much empathy the child/ren bullying have for their targets. You might then want to consider how you can increase that empathy. For example, through use of restorative approaches or circle time.

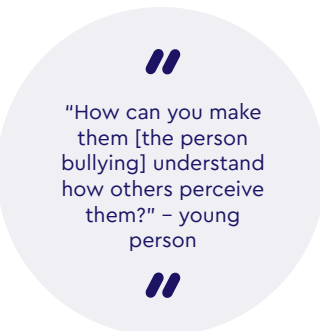
## Are they ok?



This is an important question to ask. It can often help to alleviate feelings of blame for young people which can make them feel defensive. Asking 'are you ok?' could start to make it clear that this behaviour is not ok but you are open to having a fair dialogue about it. This doesn't mean you don't get to very clear expressions of dissatisfaction with the behaviour they have displayed but it can help to put children in a place of being able to hear that and will also give children an opportunity to share anything that is concerning them before getting to the negative behaviour.

## Ask open ended questions

Rather than asking accusatory questions start by asking open ended questions. Allowing children time to express what has happened in their own words without feeling defensive. You may not have all the facts so allow them to speak and then challenge the behaviour.



## Ask what they want to happen and how they think things can get better

Just as with children who are bullied, it's important to ask children 'what can make this better?'. It will help to be clear that it is their responsibility to manage their behaviour, give them a feeling of control about what can happen going forward and allow them the space to let you know that they know what behaviour was and wasn't acceptable.

Sometimes deciding on a way forward together and recording it (even signing it as an agreed contract) can help to set out clearly what you expect going forward whilst also bringing that child with you. Don't forget to agree and share those plans with the targets of the bullying as well!

## Timing and confidentiality are important



Think carefully about when you have these difficult conversations. For example, straight after incidents emotions can be heightened and calling someone into a meeting in front of their friends can be embarrassing for both the targets of the bullying and those bullying. Consider if you need to wait for an hour or two to allow people the space to calm down or to ensure that other pupils that don't need to be involved aren't made aware of the bullying.





# ANTI-BULLYING ALLIANCE



ABA and our members provide lots of tools and information to help you with your anti-bullying activity. You can find out more on our website.

We have free CPD online training relating to bullying which you can find on our website.

[www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/onlinetraining](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/onlinetraining)

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