Bystanders and bullying
A Summary of Research for Anti-Bullying Week

a bystander

A bystander is 'a person who does not become actively involved in a situation where someone else requires help' (Clarkson 1996, p6) and in this way is understood to be a passive observer, an onlooker who watches something happening, but stays on the sidelines and doesn't intervene or get help, even if someone needs it. Bystanders are those people who slow down to look at a traffic accident, but don't stop to offer assistance, the people who watch an argument on the street, and the crowd that gathers to watch a playground fight. They are the audience that engages in the spectacle, and watches as a drama unfolds. Though they don't actively participate, they encourage the perpetrators, who will feel driven on by the audience.

Most of us have been a 'bystander' at some time. We justify it by saying that it's natural to be curious about unusual events; that there may be good reasons for not getting involved in other people's business, such as fear of getting hurt ourselves, and that we're not doing any harm.

Bystanding is not passive; witnesses to bullying play very different roles, some more active than others, and these contribute significantly to what takes place. 'Doing nothing' does have a real impact on events and may cause harm.

This briefing focuses specifically on the roles of bystanders in bullying situations involving children and young people. It summarises recent research and has been prepared to help all those involved in Anti-Bullying Week understand why the Anti-Bullying Alliance chose the theme of the bystander for Anti-Bullying Week 2006, and the evidence that underpins our work and efforts in this area.

It also explores the responsibilities of peer and adult bystanders who want to seek solutions to bullying and take action where it is needed.

research into bullying

Bullying is not new. Most adults remember experiencing or witnessing bullying in their own childhood and, while it was often unpleasant and hurtful at the time, it was generally thought to be part of human nature; a normal part of growing up, necessary to 'toughen up' children and young people and prepare them for the realities of everyday adult life.

This view has been significantly challenged since the 1980s, when the issue of bullying gained heightened profile in the media and in the research community, following a few extreme incidents in different parts of the world. The tragic deaths of children in the UK, Norway, Japan, Canada and the USA were shown to have direct links with bullying. The research found that both those who did the bullying and those who were bullied could suffer physical and mental health problems as the result of being involved in bullying. Their educational progress could be limited and their life chances negatively affected.

The pioneering research work of Dan Olweus in Norway, followed by other studies throughout the world, sought to investigate further the nature of bullying: measure the extent of bullying, find out about the characteristics of those doing the bullying and those they bully, and seek to understand why they behave as they do. Some researchers recognised that bullies were often 'victims' too and studied what has become known as the bully-victim cycle. Other researchers developed intervention programmes designed to reduce the number of bullying incidents.

In the UK, the *Elton Report on Discipline* (1989) suggested that bullying was widespread, with around 20 per cent of children being bullied in a school term, and in the same year a book on bullying was published by Valerie Besag. Action followed in the next 10 years, both at national and local level, involving government and charitable organisations. Large-scale surveys of bullying were undertaken in Sheffield (Whitney and Smith 1993) and a variety of intervention projects were started in different parts of the UK. The Department of Education and Skills (DfES) produced their guidance *Don't Suffer in Silence* (1994), and colleagues across the country started developing strategies for tackling bullying –

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these strategies included preventative efforts, interventions to respond to bullying when it happened and strategies for offering long-term support both to the people being bullied and those doing the bullying.

By the late 1990s, bullying was much more openly discussed in the UK and some schools reported a decrease in rates of children being bullied, and an increase in rates of reporting bullying (Smith and Shu 2000). Many schools had developed anti-bullying policies, and schools' actions in dealing with bullying were inspected as part of the Ofsted regime. In September 1999, it became a legal requirement for schools in England to have an anti-bullying policy.

Since then, the Children Act 2004 has further emphasised that schools and other organisations providing services for children have a responsibility to provide the necessary resources needed to ensure that the young people in their care can be safe, healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. In such a context, there is greater interest than ever in ensuring that bullying among young people is effectively addressed.

what is bullying?

'Bullying' takes many forms, face-to-face, or through third parties. The hurt can be either or both physical and emotional.

Some bullying is physical:
- kicking, hitting, pushing
- taking and damaging belongings.

Some bullying is verbal:
- name-calling
- taunting, mocking
- making offensive comments
- making threats.

Some bullying is relational:
- excluding people from groups, deliberately ignoring
- gossiping, spreading rumours.

Some bullying uses modern technology such as mobile phones, or the internet. This 'cyber bullying' includes:
- text-message bullying
- phone-call bullying
- picture/video-clip bullying (via mobile phone cameras)
- email bullying
- chat-room bullying
- bullying through instant messaging
- bullying via websites.

peer bystanders in school bullying

Smith and Sharpe (1994a) recognised the 'power of the group' in bullying situations and in the late 1990s researchers began to study in more detail the role of bystanders in school bullying. They focused on the social context in which bullying takes place and the group and peer pressures that are at play.

Canadian researchers conducted a series of studies into peer involvement in bullying (Craig and Pepler 1997, O'Connell and others 1999) and observed that peers were involved in some capacity with 85 per cent of playground bullying episodes. Within this context:
- on average, four peers viewed school yard bullying, with an age range of 2–14
- 54 per cent of peers' time was reinforcing bullies by passively watching
- 21 per cent of peers' time was actively supporting bullies
- 25 per cent of peers' time was intervening on behalf of victims
- peer interventions were equally likely to be made by boys or girls
- interventions were equally divided between aggressive and non-aggressive interventions
- 75 per cent of peer interventions were successful in stopping bullying.

They concluded that 'The problem of bullying is systemic, extending beyond the bully and victim. Like other forms of aggression, bullying unfolds in a set of social contexts: the dyad (i.e. the two children), the peer group, the playground setting, the school environment' (O'Connell and others 1999, p438).

the roles of peer bystanders

In Finland, it was recognised that most pupils in a class are bystanders of bullying situations, aware of what's going on and sometimes participating (Salmivalli 1996, 1999). Researchers asked the question 'What do other children do while the bully is harassing the victim?' and it was observed that as well as those who are bullied and those who bully, there are usually other witnesses who, through adopting particular roles, influence and affect what happens. The following 'participant roles' were identified:

- **assistants** who join in and assist the bully
- **reinforcers** who do not actively attack the victim but give positive feedback to the bully, providing an audience by laughing and making other encouraging gestures
- **outsiders** who stay away, not taking sides with anyone or becoming involved, but allowing the bullying to continue by their 'silent approval'

- **defenders** who show anti-bullying behaviour, comforting the victim, taking sides with them and trying to stop the bullying.

Bullying is, thus, seen to be a group phenomenon in which a variety of players contribute a number of roles, pressures and influences, either intentionally or unintentionally, and 'are substantially involved in playground bullying, whether as active participants or as bystanders who are unable or unwilling to act pro-socially' (O'Connell and others 1999).

Salmivalli (1999) went on to assert that peer bystanders are 'powerful moderators of behaviour' and that 'peer group power' could be utilised more positively in school classrooms to put an end to bullying.

bystander attitudes and actions

Both the Finnish and Canadian projects demonstrated a discrepancy between children's attitudes (how they intended to behave) and their actions (what they actually did when they saw bullying happen). The attitudes of most children were found to be against bullying, yet most children acted in ways that maintained and encouraged bullying rather than reduced it.

bystander interventions

Craig and Peplers' research (1997) revealed that many bystanders do not intervene because:

- children know that adults expect them to support each other but find it difficult to do so in the reality of playground life
- there is a 'diffusion of responsibility' among the crowd
- they are concerned for their own safety and self-preservation (afraid that they may become the next victims)
- they don't fully understand the process of bullying and don't have the knowledge or skills to intervene effectively, worrying that they may make matters worse for the victim.

the International Bystander Project

In June 2005, a special edition of *Pastoral Care in Education* was devoted to the role of bystanders, and presented the preliminary findings of an International Bystander Project, co-ordinated by Professor Ken Rigby and Bruce Johnson in Australia. This study involved investigations in five countries: Australia, Bangladesh, England, Israel and Italy and sought further understanding of how children

respond as bystanders and the factors, which may influence their actions.

The researchers agreed common definitions and similar methods of data collection, which involved children watching a video showing cartoons of three kinds of bullying situations, verbal, physical and sexual, and being asked to record their responses by means of a questionnaire. This included questions about how often they witnessed such incidents, how they would respond as bystanders in similar situations, and why they would choose that response.

The ultimate intention of the project was to draw international comparisons and preliminary results in 2005 indicated that in all five countries:

- most children are continually confronted with the issue of how to behave as bystanders when they witness bullying
- pupil bystanders of school bullying are far from being homogeneous. Individuals react in different ways and have different reasons for their reactions.

bystanding behaviour of English pupils

Smith and Shu (2000) found that a majority of pupils (66 per cent) claimed to have seen bullying at school and that almost half of incidents took place in the presence of two or three people, with around 70 per cent of incidents involving more than two people, including a very small percentage where more than nine people watched or participated.

When asked what they did when they saw bullying almost half (47 per cent) tried not to be involved, around a third (34 per cent) told the bullies to stop and 18 per cent asked an adult to stop it. Some pupils admitted that they did not join in but enjoyed watching (11 per cent) and smaller percentages joined in with bullying (4 per cent) or were forced to join in (3 per cent). Younger children tended to ask an adult for help in stopping bullying, older pupils generally didn't ask for help and tried not to get involved.

The English part of the International Bystander Study in 2005 (McLaughlin and others 2005, pp17–22), further explored the behaviour of pupil bystanders in 416 upper primary and lower secondary school pupils in rural and urban settings in England, and discovered that:

- most pupils had experienced at least one form of bullying in the past year
- rates of bullying reported by pupils were highest in primary school

- verbal bullying (name-calling and hurtful teasing) was the most common type of bullying experienced by victims and bystanders
- rates vary considerably between schools.

reactions to bullying

In the study children were asked both what they thought they would do if they saw a bullying incident and why they would act in this way. The responses split into three main groups:

1. Ignore bullying behaviour

Most children, especially in secondary schools, said they would ignore bullying behaviour because of fear of getting hurt, getting into trouble or making things worse. They felt it would be in everyone's best interest not to get involved.

2. Support bullying behaviour

Some children said they would support bullies, but were not clear about their reasons and no overall trend could be identified, though some said that it would be a way of avoiding trouble.

3. Actively intervene

Others said that they would take action for a range of reasons:

- moral reasons: they believed bullying to be wrong and unfair.
- because of feelings of empathy: they understood how the victim would feel and wouldn't like it if it was them. (They also recognised that bullies may need help too)
- to support someone of the same gender
- through loyalty to friends
- 85 per cent felt it was not funny to see someone teased
- 84 per cent felt that victims should complain about being bullied and the perpetrators told off.

Feelings about issues of power and strength were less clear-cut. Although 75 per cent agreed that you shouldn't pick on someone weaker than you, 11 per cent disagreed and a further 11 per cent were not sure.

choice of action

The action that most children, especially in primary schools, said they would take was to go and get a teacher because they felt:

- teachers are the most effective and proper agents of authority
- bullying is wrong and there should be consequences for bullying
- afraid for their own safety
- empathy with the victim

- powerless and incapable of sorting it out on their own
- it wasn't their business and they didn't want to get involved.

characteristics of defenders

The children who wanted to support victims and offer help displayed the following characteristics:

- they showed 'fellow feeling' and were 'pro-victim'
- they thought that their friends expected them to act (it was the expectation of the friendship group, not adults, that had impact on action)
- if they had successfully intervened in situations in the past, they were more likely to do so again.

who influenced behaviour?

Children and young people recognised that adults, including their parents and teachers, strongly disapprove of bullying, but they claimed that they were more likely to be influenced by their friends who they thought would support 'doing nothing'.

The English researchers were concerned to find that the 'incidence of bullying has remained so consistent' over decades. They found children and young people clearly believed that adults disapprove of bullying and would support those being bullied, which they interpreted as a 'statement of faith in teachers'. However, they suggested that, as a result, teachers 'may unintentionally be supporting passivity amongst children and young people rather than helping them become active agents in their own social worlds'. They proposed that initiatives were needed to 'foster the agency of peers'. They further concluded that schools are able to make a difference to the incidence of bullying.

adult bystanders

While most research into bullying involving children has focused on the behaviour of children and young people, the bully-victim-bystander model developed by Twemlow, Sacco and Williams (outlined in Twemlow and others 2001) has further described the role of teachers and the adult community of bystanders in bullying.

They describe a healthy attitude, or a healthy climate for learning, as one in which people feel 'a sense of oneness and identification with the community' and 'where there is concern for others and their welfare'. Power struggles, such as bullying, can disrupt a healthy school climate and reduce the potential for optimal learning. These 'misuses of power relationships'

are complex and often involve not only pupils, but sometimes pupils, teachers, administrative personnel, support staff and parents who may interchange roles as the one who bullies, the one who is bullied and the bystander.

While acknowledging the importance of focusing on those who bully and those being bullied and their interactions, when seeking to resolve bullying incidents, Twemlow and others (2001) argue the role of the bystander should not be under-estimated. They regarded the bystander as the 'invisible engine in the cycle of bullying'. They highlighted the contribution of adults in creating an environment where bullying can be diminished or flourish in school communities; they emphasised the importance of adults modelling positive behaviours in all their interactions with pupils and each other to set an example and promote a positive climate for learning.

reducing bullying

Many different strategies have been employed to tackle bullying and most interventions have tended to target work with individuals: offering support to those being bullied and those bullying to change their behaviour. It has been difficult to establish how effective these interventions have been in reducing the number of bullying incidents. Rigby (2003) asserts that only one study in England (Smith and Shu 2000) has attempted to estimate changes over time, and this suggests a slight reduction in reported bullying. The outcomes of evaluations related to specific intervention programmes have been mixed. The Olweus programme has claimed a 50 per cent reduction in bullying in the Bergen area of Norway, but in other areas has been less successful. Other programmes also report modest successes.

what can bystanders do?

Salmivalli (1999) suggested that the behaviour of bystanders may be 'easier to change than the behaviour of the aggressive bullies. A bully rarely continues to bully without his supporters and audience'.

The bully-victim-bystander model of Twemlow and others (2001) also suggested working with the wider audience of bystanders and claimed to create a 'metaphor' for school-wide, prevention-focused interventions targeted at 'all participants in the drama', including both peers and adults.

from research to action

A successful anti-bullying strategy includes three elements:

- prevention
- reaction
- support.

Given the strong evidence that the bystander plays a significant role in reducing bullying, it is important to consider how this will be addressed in each of these elements. Here we briefly explore this.

prevention

Preventative group work and one-to-one work focuses on raising awareness of everybody's responsibility to help and support others; promoting a culture where it is OK to ask for help and where communication and assertive skills are actively developed and encouraged.

This can take place through Personal, Social Health Education (PSHE), Circle and Tutor Time and in one to-one-work with learning Mentors and Personal Advisors.

A key factor given for bystanding is the influence of others. In those schools where it is perceived that it is solely the teachers' responsibility to stop bullying, pupils expected each other to do nothing. Unfortunately 'doing nothing' is seen as supporting bullying by the bully and the bullied. Where the only strategy espoused is to tell the teacher, pupils may not feel empowered to act themselves. All work on encouraging pupils to act must take account of safety issues and help them to recognise and seek help when it is unsafe to intervene themselves.

At primary level, teaching children strategies that they can use if they see bullying is part of Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). The skills promoted by the National Strategies SEAL resources actively contribute to helping children shift from bystanding to 'standing by'. Actively not being a bystander can promote self-esteem, the avoidance of guilt or regret, and helps to promote better mental health and relationships in a community.

A version of Clarkson's (1996) critical choice points in bystanding offer a way of stepping out of this behaviour. These are linked to the five social and emotional aspects of learning promoted in SEAL material. The acronym 'NICE' is easy to remember and, with the right teaching, easy to put into action.

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Critical choice points 'NICE'	Social and emotional aspects of learning required	Discounting the problem: strategies from 'Say no to bullying', yellow set Year 4 p28
Notice That something is happening	Self-awareness Motivation	It's existence: 'They were only having a bit of fun. Some people just can't take a joke.'
Interpret if the situation is one in which help is needed and can be given	Empathy	It's significance: 'It's not really that bad, is it – I mean there's much worse bullying where people get really hurt.'
Choose a form of assistance	Managing feelings	It's solvability: 'It's part and parcel of life – we just have to accept it as a normal part of growing up.'
Engage with the problem	Social skills	Own capacity: 'I don't like it but nothing I do is going to make a difference.' 'It's not really my business'.

The following activity is from the SEAL 'Say no to bullying' theme, yellow set p11.

How can we change the role that witnesses have, as well as encouraging them to tell? What can we do in school? Ask the children, in groups, to think about ideas for changing the role of witnesses. Examples could include:

- choosing not to watch and walking away (taking away the audience)
- being kind to the person being bullied at another time
- telling the person being bullied that you don't like the bullying and asking them if you can do anything (tell someone or go with them to tell someone)
- telling the children doing the bullying that you don't like it and to stop doing it (but only if this feels safe to do)
- 'scooping up' the child by taking them by the arm and saying something like 'Come on, we need you for our game' (again, only if it feels safe to do so)

- saying 'No, we don't like that' is very effective in the early years. Children are taught to put out their hand to sign 'stop' and act and speak assertively together
- to witness and validate the bullied child's experience after the event will reassure them that they were supported
- opportunities to contribute to the anti-bullying culture of a school through creating posters, stories or films
- exploring supportive 'standing by' behaviours in circle time or PHSE sessions.

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SEAL has a range of learning outcomes that support children not to be bystanders.

Self-awareness

Knowing myself
- I can take responsibility for my actions and learning.

Understanding my feelings
- I can identify, recognise and express a range of feelings.
- I can recognise when I am becoming overwhelmed by my feelings.
- I know that it is OK to have any feeling, but not OK to behave in any way I feel like.

Managing feelings

Managing how I express my feelings
- I can stop and think before acting.
- I can express a range of feelings in ways that do not hurt myself or other people.
- I understand that the way I express my feelings can change the way other people feel.
- I can adapt the way I express my feelings to suit particular situations or people.

Managing the way I am feeling
- I can calm myself down when I choose to.
- I have a range of strategies for managing my worries and other uncomfortable feelings.
- I understand that changing the way I think about people and events changes the way I feel about them.
- I know that I can seek support from other people when I feel angry, worried or sad.
- I know what makes me feel good and know how to enhance these comfortable feelings.

Empathy

Understanding the feelings of others
- I can recognise the feelings of others.
- I know that all people have feelings but understand that they might experience and show their feelings in different ways or in different circumstances.
- I can understand another person's point of view and understand how they might be feeling.

Valuing and supporting others
- I can be supportive to others and try to help them when they want it.
- I know that my actions affect other people and can make them feel better or worse.

Social skills

Belonging to a community
- I understand and accept my rights and responsibilities in school, and know how I can take responsibility for making the school a safe and fair place for everyone.

Friendships and other relationships
- I know how to be friendly – I can look and sound friendly, be a good listener, give and receive compliments and do kind things for other people.
- I recognise 'put-downs' and know how they affect people, so I try not to use them.

Working together
- I can work well in a group, cooperating with others to achieve a joint outcome.

Resolving conflicts
- I can resolve conflicts to ensure that everyone feels positive about the outcome.

Standing up for myself
- I can be assertive when appropriate.

Making wise choices
- I can solve problems by thinking of all the options, identifying advantages and disadvantages, choosing a solution and evaluating it later on.
- I can make a wise choice with work or behaviour.

At secondary level, materials to support the development of social, emotional and behavioural skills (SEBS) are currently being piloted as part of the Secondary National Strategy. National dissemination of the programme, mediated by behaviour and attendance consultants, will take place from September 2007, although key messages and introductory materials will be available in advance of this date.

reacting and responding

A crucial element of reacting and responding effectively is understanding what happened. Bystanders provide a crucial perspective, which can help 'unravel' a situation. One school has found that recording the names of the bystanders in their incident book has helped promote proactive and positive actions amongst peers when they see bullying happen. Several schools teach the Drama Triangle (see below) to raise awareness and empathy amongst the whole school community. One school reported aggressive incidents dropped by 75 per cent after the sessions in year six, and that the need for lunchtime detentions was stopped completely after awareness was raised of the effect of interventions to promote passivity of the child being bullied ('rescuing'), or to attack the person who bullies ('persecuting').

the Drama triangle and the role of bystanders

Bullying   Rescuing

Bullied

Bystanding
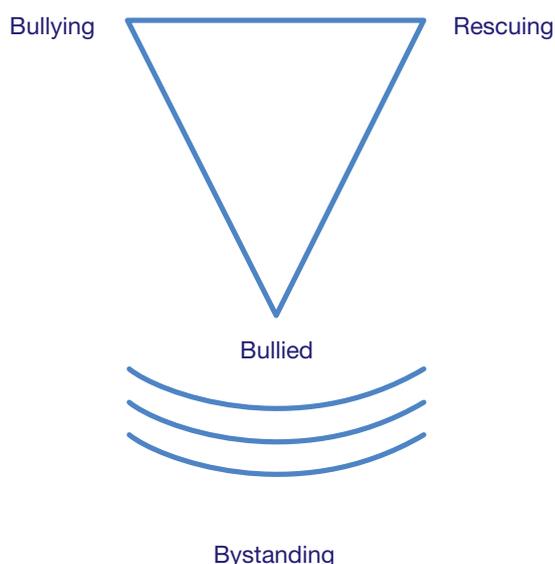
Adapted from Karpman's Drama Triangle (Clarkson 1996).

support

It is well-recognised that the people being bullied and the people bullying may require longer-term support to address underpinning issues causing them to be vulnerable to bullying or to bully others. With an increasing recognition of the important role of the bystander, it will be helpful to consider what longer-term support needs they may have. For example:

- Was their experience of seeking help positive and how will it impact on their future behaviours?
- Have they experienced any 'backlash' from peers in terms of bullying or exclusion?
- How do they feel about the situation and how it was handled and what impact has it had on them?
- Are there issues or circumstances, which make them vulnerable to bullying or increase their propensity to bully others? If so how will they be supported through these?
- Following bullying incidents, what strategies are in place to improve self-esteem and promote emotional well-being.

conclusion

Research has clearly demonstrated that bystanders play a significant role in bullying. Proactive and preventative interventions implemented at individual, class, school and community level have the potential to reduce bullying, alongside reactive strategies to deal with bullying incidents when they occur.

The risks of encouraging children to intervene in bullying situations must also be acknowledged. The challenge now is to translate the findings about the role of bystanders in bullying into innovative strategies that create a safe, positive and healthy environment for learning and provide children, young people and adults with safe ways to take action that reduces the incidence of bullying and its harmful effects.

We adults must also recognise our own bystanding behaviours and seek to model positive actions by looking at our own 'systems, structures and policies and do some audits and research into how they may be framing, perpetuating and justifying bullying and harassment among pupils' (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005).

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