

# Peer Support as an Intervention to Counteract School Bullying: Listen to the Children

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*In this article, we discuss a range of ways in which children and young people themselves can give adults insights into bullying and how to resolve it. The adoption of peer support within a school can create opportunities for children and young people to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it. © 2011 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2011 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.*

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## Introduction

Despite more than a decade of anti-bullying initiatives in schools, children and young people regularly mention relationships within the peer group as the major factor that causes them to feel unsafe at school, with thousands of children each year telephoning ChildLine UK for advice on bullying either on behalf of themselves or because of their concern for another young person (ChildLine, 2005). The Children's Commissioner for England cited bullying as a safety issue that attracted a bigger response from children and young people than any other aspect of his work (Aynsley-Green, 2006, p. 65). The situation is complicated by the fact that these interpersonal safety issues are actually generated by the peer group and often in contexts that are difficult for adults to control. The recent upsurge of cyberbullying is a case in point. Teachers and parents are often powerless to intervene in the private world that children and young people create for themselves (Cowie, 2009; Cowie and Colliety, 2010).

## Bullying as relational practices

Some children are able to deal with bullying experiences by using their own inner resources to cope with the distress of being bullied. This quality of resilience may arise from the young person's emotional make-up or their history of friendship and close attachments. It is useful, therefore, to hear from bullied children themselves how they cope and what strategies they try. Bullies often intend to cause physical or psychological distress and they often succeed. Displays of sadness and surprise are observed most frequently in bullied children and confirm the bully's expectation of suffering and resignation.

A longitudinal study by carried out in 35 UK schools over a period of 2 years (Cowie, 2002; Smith and others, 2004) investigated why some children continued to be bullied while others escape. The researchers asked the children how they dealt with the bullying. They found that

'escaped victims' (those who were no longer being bullied after a period of 2 years) did not differ substantially in terms of their profiles from non-victims. However, the pupils who had escaped from being bullied reported a number of effective strategies, such as telling someone, actively trying to make new friends and even befriending the bully – strategies which the 'continuing victims' (those who had been bullied for more than 2 years) were less likely to possess. The continuing victims had a significantly worse attendance rate at school in this study – a strategy that probably only served to isolate them further from their peers. They were more likely to blame themselves. They were also more likely to suffer in silence. Some had no friends to confide in; others were intimidated by the peer group as a whole and imagined that everyone was in collusion with the bullies. These results suggested that low self-esteem and poor social skills may pre-date victimisation and may well affect how successful the individual is in taking steps to escape. Understandably, being victimised may further reduce their self-esteem, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle and making these individuals even more susceptible to the effects of victimisation.

The dynamics of peer relationships are very complex so it is not just a question of adopting a strategy and thereby escaping the bullying. In fact, asking members of the peer group for help may not always be a successful strategy. Many children and young people look down on children who are bullied (Rigby and Slee, 1991). Escobar (2008) found that, for children rejected by their peers, there was an adverse effect from adopting the coping strategies of seeking social support from the peer group and making use of professional help, such as counselling. In other words, coping strategies that were effective for emotionally adjusted children became dysfunctional for those in greatest need of support. A vulnerable child who is rejected by the peer group may be perceived as too 'needy' and demanding when they seek out social support. There may also be a stigma attached to those who receive professional help for emotional difficulties. Escobar did not actually explore the impact of peer support in her study but other researchers (e.g. Cowie and others, 2008) indicate the willingness of peer supporters to take account of the bullied child's need for anonymity when seeking out help when being bullied.

Escobar's findings are confirmed by Mahady Wilton and others (2000) who give useful insights into the emotional responses that children express during bullying episodes. Victims of bullying are naturally very upset by their peers' behaviour, but if they display their emotions in ways that the peer group deems to be inappropriate then they are less likely to get support from others; in fact, the bullying may increase. If bullied children respond with excessive crying and distress or if they lash out with aggressive retaliation, this may simply motivate the bullies to further attacks. Mahady Wilton and others (2000) found significant differences between the emotions expressed by bullies and those by victims during aggressive interactions. The emotional expressions of interest, joy and anger accounted for 90% of all bullies' emotional displays during a bullying episode, indicating their social dominance. In other words, these encounters were highly rewarding for the bullies. Emotional reactions on the part of their victims – whether of anger or distress – would only serve to increase their enjoyment.

Mahady Wilton and others (2000, p. 240) concluded that children who are easily aroused and have difficulties in regulating their emotions are 'at higher risk of regulation dysfunction – in effect, their emotional feeling states overwhelm their coping processes'. With regard to the management of emotions in the presence of peers, emotional regulation can be taught in Personal and Social Education lessons, for example, during lessons on anger management. Most emotional regulation, however, is learned informally through a process of observation of peer group behaviour and direct experience of peer relationships. In a sense, these

processes of managing emotions are developed in informal communities of coping as a way of dealing with the ups and downs of everyday life.

Many children and young people, particularly those who are accepted by their peers, find benefit in the management of their emotions. Those who do not fit for whatever reason, however, will experience costs, if the emotions that they are being required to manage are simply too overwhelming.

Studies like these indicate the importance of building up the inner strengths of bullied children as well as their social networks so that they can discriminate among strategies that are effective for them and those that are counter-productive, for example, when they bottle up their feelings, over-react emotionally or try too hard to elicit social approval from their peers. Staying calm in the face of bullying is a difficult task and the strengths required should not be under-estimated. To attempt to solve their problem alone is too difficult for many young people.

### **Bullying within moral and social orders/Bullying as a normative order of the playground**

However important the *interpersonal* nature of bullying may be, no analysis would be complete without considering the phenomenon in its *social* context. Bullying can come from an individual or a group and it can also be embedded in the social systems of the school (Cowie and Jennifer, 2007). We know that the social context plays a critical role in the emergence of bullying behaviour so there is a lot that young people can do to prevent it happening and to address it once it has happened.

A team of researchers in Finland (Salmivalli and others, 1996) found that most students know when someone is being bullied, even if they are not directly involved themselves. This means that they play a part in the bullying situation, even if they think that it is not their business. The Finnish researchers identified a number of *participant roles* in bullying. This included not only *Bullies* and *Victims*, but also *Assistants* to the bully, *Reinforcers* of bullying, *Outsiders* and *Defenders*.

Each role can have a profound impact on whether bullying continues or whether members of the peer group intervene to stop it. *Assistants* actively help the bully (e.g. by keeping a look out for the approach of a teacher) and *Reinforcers* provide positive feedback to a bully by shouting encouragement or laughing at the victim's plight. *Outsiders* contribute indirectly to a bullying situation simply by taking no action against the bully, although they are likely to be aware of what is happening. *Outsiders* constitute the silent majority who keep their heads down and mind their own business. *Defenders* actively defend victims, for example, by running for help or by offering support to the victim, either at the time of the incident or afterwards. Taking account of the social context in which bullying takes place offers essential insights into why it happens and why substantial numbers of children and young people can take part, whether influenced by their families, their communities or the immediate peer group.

### **Empowering children and young people to take action through peer support**

This is where peer support systems have the potential to offer solutions. Peer support is a form of defending through training in how to respond to a peer's distress. Peer support takes many forms but the main approaches are as follows:

- *Befriending schemes*: where peer supporters are trained to offer friendship or informal support.
- *Peer mediation*: where peer supporters are trained to bring the bully and victim together to resolve their difficulty.
- *Active listening*: where peer supporters are trained in counselling skills to offer emotional support to bullied children.

Peer support methods educate students to take responsibility for their own actions and provide training in a range of interpersonal, social and conflict resolution skills. They also provide opportunities for reflection on self and others through regular supervision.

Cowie and Smith (2010) demonstrate how systems of peer support not only help individuals to deal with the emotional impact of rejection and social exclusion at the hands of peers but also create a more positive ethos in the school community. They identified evidence-based strategies, including training programmes in active listening, peer mediation and befriending, to address emotions of distress, anger and fear. The capacity of peer supporters to listen and learn facilitates the recognition and effective management of emotions and is germane to the development of a caring school community.

Cowie and Oztug (2008) and Cowie and others (2008), in their evaluation of the effectiveness of peer support systems in making schools safer, concluded that, for peer support to be used to best effect, students should be encouraged and trained to consult with the school population to discover the particular issues of concern, common fears and anxieties as well as suggestions for making safer, friendlier school environments. In particular, they recommended that peer supporters should conduct surveys to find out issues of concern, that there should be regular feedback on the impact of interventions such as peer support and that school supervision (by peers as well as adults) should target particular places (e.g. toilets) and times (breaks and lunch hours) in response to the findings of such surveys.

In fact, the power of peer support is confirmed by ethological studies of conflict resolution proposing that the solution may arise naturally out of peer interactions rather than as a result of intervention by adults (Killen and de Waal, 2000; Killen and Smetana, 2006). The Relational Model (de Waal, 2000) guides this explanation by proposing that all social animals, including humans, spontaneously develop constructive ways of coping with interpersonal conflict. Underpinning this view is the premise that aggressive conflict depends on experience-based calculations weighing short-term gain against possible damage to social relationships. The likelihood of peacemaking increases when conflicting parties (a) share mutual interest in repairing damage to their relationship and (b) have access to relational-repair mechanisms.

Oztug and Cowie (2010) suggest that there is a need to consult with children themselves on the most suitable methods to adopt in addressing the issues that they have identified as being of concern. For example, schemes such as *Checkpoints for Young People* (Varnava, 2002) involve a process of consultation to achieve a safer and happier quality of life at school for all by providing the students with a tool for identifying the social and interpersonal issues that they find most difficult. The efficacy of *Checkpoints for Young People* was evaluated by Jennifer and Shaughnessy (2005) who found an improvement in the quality of life at school and a reduction in overt bullying behaviours, such as hitting, tripping and shouting in compassion with control schools.

## Conclusion

It is proposed here that adults need to give more opportunities to children to share their fears and anxieties and also to create possible solutions. Interviews with young people by Hutson and Cowie (2007), for example, reveal awareness of the discomfort experienced by many bystanders when they observe other students being mistreated by their peers and also show that some bullies feel guilty about their abusive behaviour and may welcome the opportunity to change their ways, for example, by volunteering to become peer supporters.

The adoption of peer support within a whole-school policy can create opportunities for bystanders to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it. Peer supporters can play a part in this process by monitoring social interaction during breaktimes to support individuals who are being targeted and to be vigilant in reporting abusive behaviour. With regard to cyberbullying, peer supporters can also contribute to the creation of a climate in which bystanders refuse to collude with negative behaviour, whether offline or online.

Peer support schemes take account of the power of emotionally sensitive individuals to use their own and others' emotional states to prevent problems and find solutions to bullying and abuse. This approach emphasises the importance of interpersonal skills and teamwork in promoting an open, accepting culture and in considering the school as a community.

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