

This briefing looks at the evidence of the increased vulnerability of disabled children and young people to bullying and the impact this can have on them. It considers the legislative and policy context, including the new Disability Equality Duty. It also suggests what further action can be taken by schools and those working with disabled children and young people to ensure they are providing inclusive, safe and positive environments, free from disablist bullying.

Bullying and disability

Disabled children and young people have the same right as other children and young people to feel safe, enjoy life and grow up without the fear of being bullied. Yet, recent reports from the Children's Commissioner (Bullying Today 2006) and the National Autistic Society (B is for Bullied, 2006) show how disabled children and young people are more likely than their peers to become targets of bullying.

The new Disability Equality Duty requires schools and other services funded by local authorities to be proactive in eliminating disability-related harassment and promoting more positive attitudes towards disabled children and young people. In relation to bullying this means that:

Disabled children and young people need:

- To know they have the right to be safe from bullying. They need to know what bullying is, how to keep safe and what to do if adults do not do enough to stop the bullying.
- To be involved in developing anti-bullying policies and also asked about bullying when schools and other services are planning their Disability Equality Scheme.
- All children and young people to know what to do to help stop a disabled child or young person being bullied.

Adults need:

- To listen to children and young people and be willing and able to act to help disabled children and young people who are being bullied.
- To be able to promptly spot when a disabled child or young person is being bullied and to know what to do to

prevent it and stop it when it occurs.

Schools and youth services need to:

- Take action to prevent the bullying of disabled children and young people and ensure they adopt a whole-school approach to tackling and eliminating bullying. They need to ensure that staff show leadership in valuing differences between children.
- Include bullying in their Disability Equality Scheme.
- Be trained on how to spot when a disabled child or young person is being bullied and what to do to prevent it and stop it as soon as it occurs.
- Make sure their anti-bullying policies address disablist bullying and are responsive to the views of disabled children and young people.

Evidence that disabled children and young people are more vulnerable to bullying

- The Office of the Children's Commissioner found that disabled children and those with visible medical conditions can be **twice as likely** as their peers to become targets for bullying behaviour.
- The National Autistic Society found that **two out of five** children on the autistic spectrum had been bullied at school.
- Mencap found that nearly **nine out of 10** people with a learning disability experience some form of bullying, with over two-thirds experiencing it on a regular basis.

Disablist bullying has received relatively little research attention. However, since the 1990s, studies have demonstrated

the increased likelihood of disabled children and young people being bullied, compared to non-disabled peers (Nabuzoka and Smith 1993; Dawkins 1996). More recent research has tended to focus on individual disabilities, but has further confirmed that disabled children and young people are at greater risk of being victimised. Recent reviews of research findings suggest that vulnerability to bullying cuts across all types of disability (Mishna 2003; Smith and Tippett 2006).

There are some common factors that seem to make some children and young people more vulnerable to bullying. Many of these are likely to be found in disabled children and young people and include the following:

- *Lack of social skills:* Young people with a learning disability or who are on the autistic spectrum may act in ways which seem unconventional or unusual. They may lack the social skills or confidence to fit in easily with their peer group. Fox and Boulton (2005), using self, peer and teacher reports, found that victims of bullying often lacked a variety of social skills.
- *Number and quality of friends:* Both having friends, and also friends that you can trust and who will stand by you, are well documented protective factors against victimisation (Hodges and others 1999). A multi-national study found children left alone at playtime were at much greater risk of being bullied (Eslea and others 2002). Many studies have found that disabled children have fewer friends than non-disabled children (Nabuzoka 2000).
- *Being socially rejected and isolated:* Social rejection is common for



disabled children (Nabuzoka and Smith 1993; Dixon and others 2004). Greenham (1999) found that 25–30 per cent of children with a learning disability were socially rejected by their peers, compared with between 8 and 16 per cent of children without a learning disability.

- **Physical appearance:** Disabled children and young people are often bullied simply because they are seen to be 'different' from other young people. One study found almost a third of children that experience health concerns as a result of bullying have a physical disability (Leff 1999) and a number of other studies have suggested a link between the likelihood of being bullied and having unusual personal characteristics.
- **Absences from school:** Disabled children and young people may be more absent from school if they are receiving treatment or special lessons; and this can affect their social standing and friendships (Graetz and Shute 1995; Storch and others 2004).

A fuller research summary on disability and bullying has been prepared for the Anti-Bullying Alliance and will be available to download from the website.

The impact on disabled children and young people

The experience or anticipation of being bullied can shape a young person's sense of self and social relationships and can have a corrosive and damaging impact on their self-esteem, mental health, social skills and progress at school. These effects can be particularly felt by disabled children and young people who are often socially excluded in any case. James is nine years old, and has a learning disability and a facial disfigurement. He describes his experiences at school.

'I get bullied every day. The kids don't play with me. It's because I'm dumb. They say I'm stupid because I don't understand, they call me Quasimodo. They normally call me names, or they pretend I'm not there and they can't hear me. They pass notes and just leave me out. They barge me when we're lining up, they say stuff like "we didn't see you there Quasi:"

They tease me because I have my own helper who helps me with my work ... she's nice, she keeps telling me I'm just having a bad day and I shouldn't let them get to me. I try to ignore it but I can't. Every day is a bad day for me.'

Mona is an eight-year-old girl and has a condition that makes the bones in her legs grow differently; because of this she often walks and runs much more slowly than her classmates. Her classmates often pretend to let her play and join in with them at playtime, then run off and claim it's part of the game and continue playing in a further area of the playground. When she finally catches up with them they run off again. Mona eventually gets fed up and just sits in one place on her own. This routine happens most lunch and break times.

For many disabled children and young people, bullying can be an insidious and relentless pressure that can dominate their lives, leaving them feeling depressed and withdrawn. This is particularly true if the bullying is not dealt with promptly and is allowed to continue. For many disabled children and young people, the bullying continues over many years and blights lives into adulthood.

There are several reasons why disabled bullying has a long-term impact:

- Some disabled children and young people, particularly those with a learning disability, are unaware of what bullying is. They think that being hurt every day is part of their life and do not do anything about it.
- Others know they are being bullied but do not let an adult know. This could be because they are too scared to, or because they have communication difficulties, which make it more difficult to get an adult to listen or understand what they need.

'When I was bullied I kept it secret but I wished somebody knew and helped me.' (Kamal, 13)

- Adults do not know how to spot when a disabled child or young person is being bullied. Quite often if a disabled child or young person is being bullied, their behaviour may alter. Many adults see this change of behaviour as part of the disability, rather than identifying bullying as the reason for this change.

'They always say tell a teacher if you are being bullied and when I do nothing happens ... because they don't see what happens. They should look harder.' (James, 9)

- When disabled children and young people tell an adult, the adult often does not do enough to help and the bullying does not stop. The adult may

not see the incident as bullying, even though the child or young person believes it is, and may tell the child to 'grow up' or they may not be aware of how to deal with it.

Sara, a 12-year-old girl with learning disabilities, was being physically bullied for over three months before any action was taken, despite telling parents and teachers at the start:

'He would push me, swear at me, say mean things and walk up and slap me.'

Omir, an 11-year-old boy with a learning disability, experienced physical bullying and intimidation from a fellow pupil for over five months before any action was taken to stop it.

'I went to the toilets and said hello, he just started to punch and kick me. Now I don't go to the toilet unless I know he is in the classroom or if my friend comes with me.'

- When disabled children and young people are bullied they are often not offered appropriate support. They are more likely to be moved or excluded as staff often lack skills in developing coping strategies with disabled children and young people.

Bullying and the threat of bullying can have a substantial knock-on effect on all aspects of a child's life. Disabled children and young people are often frightened that they will be bullied and this makes them scared to go places and try new things, which ultimately prevents them from feeling safe and enjoying and achieving in life.

Legislation and guidance

Disabled children and young people have the same right to be safe as their non-disabled peers. They have an additional right – the right to live a life free from discrimination and harassment.

Duties placed on schools have introduced important anti-bullying safeguards for *all* children. The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) and the Education Act (2002) place a legal obligation on schools to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and to prevent bullying.

In relation to disability, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) makes it unlawful for a school to discriminate against a disabled pupil; and the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) requires schools to pro-actively promote disability equality and eliminate

disability-related harassment. Schools and public bodies are required to produce a Disability Equality Scheme to show how they are meeting these new duties (visit www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/disabilityandthetdda for further information).

Every Child Matters requires schools to help all children achieve five key outcomes, including staying safe, being healthy and making a positive contribution.

Guidance to schools on how to tackle bullying has been provided through the resource pack *Don't Suffer in Silence* (DfES 2002, currently under revision), which has a short section on pupils with SEN or disabilities. Many of the strategies suggested in this section to reduce levels of bullying focus too narrowly on improving the social skills of the disabled pupil rather than altering the culture of the school. The DfES Anti-Bullying Charter refers to bullying on the grounds of disability. Revised generic guidance with improved coverage of disabled bullying as well as specialist dedicated guidance on this form of bullying is expected from the Department for Education and Skills later this year.

Anti-bullying policies

All schools must have an anti-bullying policy in place, which needs to be explicit in terms of the steps that will be taken by the school when incidents of bullying are reported or identified by staff, parents and children. The policy should be available for Teachers, pupils and parents. To date, disabled bullying has received limited attention at a national and local level and anti-bullying strategies do not often have a well-developed disability focus. In a recent survey by the National Autistic Society (2006) almost one-quarter of parents didn't know if an anti-bullying policy was in place in their child's school, even though schools are required to publish their policy. Of those parents whose children had been bullied, 44 per cent say no action was taken by the school. For young people over the age of 16, nearly two-thirds of parents said that action was not taken to stop bullying.

Given this lack of awareness about school policies it is critical that everyone in the school community is involved in developing, owning and reviewing the anti-bullying policy. A whole-school approach – involving pupils, Teachers, support staff, Governors, parents and carers – is the most effective way to

prevent bullying and address the behaviour of bullies (NCB 2004). It is based on developing a framework or policy that promotes shared values, beliefs and attitudes that inhibit bullying and gives guidance on how to manage and record bullying incidents.

Supporting disabled children and young people

Healthy Schools, PSHE, Citizenship and SEAL programmes in schools provide opportunities for schools to explore the issues of equality, valuing diversity and disability generally and specifically in relation to bullying. Raising awareness of disability among other children can help them understand why someone may be different, communicate in different ways or behave differently. This improved awareness can encourage them to support their disabled peers and discourage bullying. Often disabled children and young people can be involved in raising awareness of bullying in local schools.

Increasingly frustrated by on-going bullying by local school children, a group of adults with learning disabilities who attended a local day centre in Nottingham created their own anti-bullying video. Through their theatre group called Evergreen, they produced *Josephine*, a short video that raises the attitudes these adults have to encounter on a daily basis. They have followed this up with visits to local schools where they have shown the video and joined in discussions with pupils about the issues of bullying.

Funding was provided in the City of Nottingham to support a group of disabled young people develop their own resource in Citizenship. Drawn from mainstream and special schools they met over two years, developing a series of stories that highlighted aspects of their lives. Bullying both at school and in the community was a real source of concern to the young people and they felt empowered, not only in telling their stories but by putting them into print, to help others. The publication *Listen to Us* is aimed at pupils with and without disabilities as part of PHSE and Citizenship education.

Other approaches such as peer mentoring, befriending and buddying schemes, structured play activities during breaks and circles of friends can offer effective ways of supporting disabled children and making them less vulnerable to bullying (NAS 2006).

Ensuring anti-bullying work is inclusive

- adopt a rights-based approach to bullying – disabled children and young people have the right to be safe as other children
- have a robust and consistent whole-school approach to bullying, which makes it clear that bullying on the grounds of disability will not be tolerated
- embrace the new Disability Equality Duty and be pro-active in promoting equality and eliminating harassment and discrimination
- ensure the school environment is welcoming, supportive and inclusive of disabled children and young people
- make disability equality training compulsory for staff
- listen to disabled children and young people's views on bullying and promote their participation in developing and reviewing policies and practice. This may involve giving them access to suitable communication systems
- establish support mechanisms to help disabled children and young people who are being bullied. Young people need to know they can rely on help that they feel comfortable with and have somewhere they can go to feel safe, both in school and in the community
- use a variety of methods to explore the issues of disability and bullying in a supportive and non-threatening way through drama, art and poetry. This will help both disabled and non-disabled children and young people
- ensure disabled pupils have opportunities to participate in school clubs and groups, to develop friendships and take an active part in all aspects of school life
- adopt approaches to support disabled children and young people and prevent bullying, such as befriending and buddying schemes, peer mentoring and circle of friends.

This briefing was prepared with contributions from Anti-Bullying Alliance members, Professor Peter Smith and Neil Tippet (Goldsmith's College) and Esmée Russell (Mencap). Ida Pottin (on secondment to the Anti-Bullying Alliance from the Department of Health) provided the quotes from interviews conducted with young disabled children in schools in London. The Shepherd School provided the examples of how young disabled people have provided resources to help raise awareness of the impact of bullying.

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Useful organisations

Anti-Bullying Alliance

The Anti-Bullying Alliance is hosted by NCB and funded by The Department for Education and Skills and donations. The Alliance brings together 65 organisations in a national network with the aim of reducing bullying and creating safer environments.

www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

Council for Disabled Children

The Council for Disabled Children (CDC) provides a national forum for issues relating to service provision and support for children and young people with disabilities and special educational needs.

www.ncb.org.uk/cdc

Mencap

Mencap works with people with a learning disability, their families and carers.

www.mencap.org.uk/campaigns/children/bullying.asp

www.mencap.org.uk

Department for Education and Skills

The Department for Education and Skills provides advice and guidance for schools about their responsibilities in relation to bullying prevention and management.

www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying

The National Autistic Society

The National Autistic Society exists to champion the rights and interests of all people with autism.

www.autism.org.uk/bullyingengland

www.nas.org.uk

Contact a Family

Contact a Family provides advice,

information and support to professionals and the parents of all disabled children.

Freephone helpline 10-4pm:
0808 808 3555

www.cafamily.org.uk

Smile, No Bullying project

Staff workshops on supporting people with learning disabilities

- implementing best practice within your service
- understanding bullying
- strategies to tackle bullying
- positive image
- case studies.

Call the positive futures healthy living centre on 0115 934 9567 to find out more or email:
rebecca.tivey@pfhlc.org.uk

Young Minds

Young Minds is a national charity committed to improving the mental health of babies, children and young people.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Young Voice

Young Voice is a registered charity undertaking research in partnership with young people.

www.young-voice.org

ChildLine

ChildLine is a free, 24-hour helpline for children in distress or danger.

www.childline.org.uk/extra/allaboutme.asp

www.childline.org.uk

Shepherd School Nottingham

The Shepherd School is for young people with special educational needs, in particular, severe and profound learning difficulties.

www.shepherdschool.org.uk

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