

The No Blame, or Peer Support Approach to Bullying

Summarized from a paper by George Robinson, Director of Studies to the Inset programme, Faculty of Education, University of the West of England and by Barbara Maines, an educational psychologist employed by Avon LEA. The paper was presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science 1994 meeting.

Taking the view that bullying is an interaction that establishes group identity, dominance and status at the expense of another, and then it is only by the development of 'higher values' such as empathy, consideration and unselfishness, that the bully is likely to relinquish her behaviour and function differently in a social setting. If the preventative policy depends upon policing the environment, forbidding the behaviour, encouraging the victims and punishing the perpetrators, then no lasting change can be expected.

When bullying has been observed or reported the following steps can be taken:

- **Step one:** interview with the victim. When the teacher finds out that bullying has happened she starts by talking to the victim about his feelings. She does not question him about the incidents but she does need to know who was involved.
- **Step two:** convene a meeting with the people involved. The teacher arranges to meet with the group of pupils who have been involved. This will include some bystanders or colluders who joined in but did not initiate any bullying. We find that a group of six or eight young people works well.
- **Step three:** explain the problem. She tells them about the way the victim is feeling and might use a poem, a piece of writing or a drawing to emphasize his distress. At no one time does she discuss the details of the incidents or allocate blame to the group.
- **Step four:** share responsibility. The teacher does not attribute the blame but states that she knows that the group is responsible and can do something about it. 'Each member of the group is encouraged to suggest a way in which the victim could be helped to feel happier'
- **Step five:** ask the group for their ideas. Each member of the group is encouraged to suggest a way in which the victim could be helped to feel happier. The teacher gives some positive responses but she does not go on to extract a promise of improved behaviour.
- **Step six:** leave it up to them. The teacher ends the meeting by passing over the responsibility to the group to solve the problem. She arranges to meet them again to see how things are going.
- **Step seven:** meet them again. About a week later the teacher discusses with each student, including the victim, how things have been going. This allows the teacher to monitor the bullying and keeps the young people involved in the process.

Responding to the 'yes ... but!'

- You are not seen to be taking strong action - what will parents, pupils, colleagues think? A school that has clear, written policy on its anti-bullying procedures is not likely to incur disapproval from the community. In our experience most dissatisfaction arises when the teachers do not take parental complaints seriously or when they respond by blaming the victim: - 'It's six of one and half a dozen ... ', 'She doesn't do much to help herself.'

We have attended several parents meetings and explained the 'no blame approach' and the reaction has been very positive. Parents of victims may have feelings of revenge and anger but when we reassure them that something will be done we find they agree that the most important thing is to stop the bullying.

- What do you do if there is a serious incident of violence? When another seriously assaults a pupil then the usual sanctions must be applied, even calling the police if appropriate. This does not mean that the 'no blame approach' cannot be tried as well since the particular incident of violence would not be discussed. The issue

addressed is the misery of the victim and how that might be alleviated.

- Surely you need to know exactly what went on? It is only necessary to know that bullying is happening and to have the names of the young people involved. Any attempts to take accurate accounts about the events are likely to stir up further disputes, to increase hostility towards the victims and to waste a lot of time because the 'truth' may be hard to find and may vary from one person's perspective to another. Bullying is a complex process and you are not likely to discover all its ramifications and certainly not all its causes by questioning the participants.

- What if only one bully is involved? We believe that it is very rare that bullying takes place in real isolation - there is nearly always some knowledge and even consent from a group, even if they disapprove and refuse to join in. Secret bullying of one person by another is rare and hard to discover but if it is revealed then the 'no blame approach' might still be tried. A peer group could be given the opportunity to help put things right, even if they have not been involved in the unhappiness.

- What if the bully is seriously disturbed? Pupils with seriously maladaptive behaviours should be helped in the usual way. The 'no blame approach' is planned to stop bullying, not to treat pathology. Any individual who is involved in this process may be offered other additional interventions or referred for specialist advice as necessary.

- What about victims that provoke bullying? Why can't we help the victim directly? Some victims may display behaviours that appear to encourage bullying from their peers. Any young person who has poor social and friendship skills or who is very unassertive should be offered help and support in order to learn appropriate social interaction. This should not be implied as a responsibility to stop the bullying for themselves.

When the group convenes to discuss the plight of the victim someone may suggest that he or she is encouraged to behave in a different way ... 'we could ask her to stop...' That is fine as long as the group take the responsibility to help her and the changes are within her ability.

Conclusion

Bullying is a serious problem that spoils the lives and learning of a significant number of young people in schools. It is time to stop collecting the data on frequency. Bullying does occur in all schools. Preventative approaches will reduce it but it will still happen and teachers need to know how to deal with it when it does.

The No Blame Approach seems almost too simple and it is hard for teachers to let go of the traditional ways of dealing with the behaviour - interrogation and punishment. However, the students and parents tell us that all they care about is that the behaviour stops - and this intervention achieves just that.