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## **Handout - Bullying, and mental health**

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Bullying has a devastating effect on mental health which we often overlook as we feel it's not really bullying, or we just want to say ignore it. It's human nature.

It is important to define bullying. I like the definition from [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov) 'Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behaviour among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behaviour is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.'

The important point here is a perceived balance of power. It is important that this is understood. It is perceived. We may not see it or understand the perceived balance of power, but it may be real for the victim. It is what they are feeling that is important.

We have all had to deal with issues where a child or parent is claiming bullying is taking place when it is actually a friendship break up/issue and these can make it difficult to assess when real bullying is taking place. The key is to look at the imbalance or the perceived imbalance. Sometimes ex friends do turn into bullies because they know the 'sensitive' issues for the victim and it's likely there was an imbalance in the friendship anyway. Do think about these things when dealing with bullying.

### **The effects of bullying**

We can all remember events from our childhood where we were bullied. Some of these would have been serious. And they may have caused us to have lasting negative beliefs about ourselves. Surveys generally report that 20-25% of students report being bullied at school.

### **Bullying can be social, verbal or physical**

We also have to look at causality. Does bullying cause mental health issues or does having an existing mental health condition mean you are more likely to be bullied? Research does indicate that having a mental health issue means a child is more likely to be bullied. We are all aware of children with anxiety, low self-esteem and or social difficulties who will suffer from bullying because of those issues. Also, children with behavioural and anger issues are more likely to bully other children. However, there is no doubt that bullying is likely to further worsen the mental health issues, especially for the victim, and then make them even more susceptible to being bullied.

Bullying can also be for more obvious reasons: homophobic bullying because of sexual, racist bullying because of skin colour, religious bullying because of beliefs or faith, sizeist bullying referring to body size, and sexist bullying focusing being on the opposite sex. Some of these count as discrimination according to the Equality Act. They are protected characteristics and the school has a legal responsibility to act upon this. Linking to the previous paragraph, being different in some way is likely to mean low self-esteem further making them vulnerable to bullying and the effects of.

In terms of the long-term effects of bullying, there was a study that said the long-term impact of bullying has the same impact on mental health as being neglected by parents. This study isn't widely accepted for various reasons, but there is no doubt bullying can have a long-term impact and, in some cases, cause PTSD.

Studies show that bullying victims are definitely more likely to suffer mental health problems as adults, and be less successful in relationships and financially, even when taking out other risk factors. So, bullying is serious.

### **How to help with the mental health aspect**

Named staff – have staff that are specifically there to be a contact for the victim. Someone that a victim can talk to confidentially without taking action. Victims often fear that the aggressor will instantly be confronted, and action taken which could make things worse. To be able to discuss it without the fear of action being taken against their wishes is important. It's also important to ensure these named staff are accessible and can be met with without it being seen, so think about the logistics of that.

Safe place – unstructured times, such as break times, are very common times for vulnerable children to be bullied and feel most anxious. Provide a safe protected space during these times. This should be for all vulnerable children.

Listening and acknowledging is vital. Remember how much we discussed this at the workshop. Being heard and validated is always the first line of support. Hence the named staff.

Other ways of supporting the victim really aren't dissimilar to supporting mental health generally. It's about supporting low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

Low self-esteem – allowing them to talk about being bullied will help, having someone listen to you always boosts self-esteem. Consider using other techniques to express their emotions if they struggle to verbalise, e.g. arts, Blob Tree, sand tray, etc. Undertake activities to remind them of what they are good at.

Anxiety – discuss where the anxiety arises. Use some of the techniques from the workshop day to work through the anxieties. Discuss what they can do next time they meet the bully, what options they have, and practise the chosen options so they feel able to react differently. Understanding you have options can help some children feel more empowered.

Depression – a reaction to being bullied can be socially isolating yourself and we discussed at the workshop how important it is not to do that. Work with the young person to develop positive peer relationships where they feel they belong and they feel safe.

Never, ever, ever, ever:

- dismiss what they are telling you
- tell them it's not that bad
- tell them to just stand up to it
- blame them in any way.

### **Supporting the bully and bystanders**

Looking at the impact of bullying on mental health isn't just about the victim. Obviously, there should be consequences for the bully. But that doesn't mean mental health support shouldn't also be provided.

The bully is just as likely to be suffering from mental health issues as their victim. One study showed that bullies are twice as likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and/or ADHD. Some research also shows that victims and bullies have suicidal thoughts three times more often than other children.

Speak to the bully about their emotions and feelings and talk about if the bullying made them feel better. In order to be effective, there has to be unconditional positive regard towards the child and using guilt won't work. Discuss more suitable ways of managing the difficult emotions rather than bullying. Look at the cause of those emotions. These should all sound familiar to you because they are the basic strategies. Improve self-esteem and give alternative ways of expressing emotions.

### **Further information**

- **Bullying at school**, Bullying UK <https://www.bullying.co.uk/bullying-at-school/>
- **Kidscape** <https://www.kidscape.org.uk>
- **National Bullying Helpline** <http://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/>