

Support group approach to deal with bullying

Acknowledgements

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The power of working with groups

A series of group sessions can be a powerful methodology when dealing with a bullying incident, especially if bystanders are complicit in the bullying behaviour, "egg" on the person/young people who are bullying, or are apathetic/passive towards the bullying behaviour, and have little empathy with the young person/people who are being bullied.



Where traditional disciplinary approaches or sanction may sometimes be appropriate depending on the nature of the incident, increasingly schools and other youth settings are using alternative approaches to bullying that encourage a positive change in the motivation of the young person who has bullied, and support for the target of the bullying.

The primary aims of such approaches are to:

- **Prevent, de-escalate and/or stop any continuation of harmful behaviour.**
- **React to bullying incidents in a reasonable, proportionate and consistent way.**
- **Safeguard the young person who has experienced bullying and trigger sources of support for them.**

Such approaches should be viewed within the wider context of aiming to develop and embed an ethos of support and friendship for all vulnerable children and young people, where children and young people understand the responsibilities of the bystander in preventing incidents of bullying and supporting those vulnerable to bullying behaviour. This would include opportunities to discuss prejudice and challenge negative attitudes.

WARNING

The materials presented here are for illustrative purposes only.

If any of these approaches are to be adopted in your school, it must be accompanied by staff training, development and support from appropriately skilled, accredited and/or trained staff.

For advice and guidance regarding training, contact:

Achievement for All 3As by email: antibullying@afa3as.org.uk

Support Group Approach to Bullying (adapted from Robinson & Maines: 2000)

Developed by Barbara Maines and George Robinson, the Support Group Approach is a non-punitive, problem-solving approach based on the belief that punishing the young people who are exhibiting bullying behaviour does not end bullying.

It stresses that it is bullying behaviour, rather than the person doing the bullying, that is not liked and that the main aim of the intervention is to stop the bullying.



The approach involves setting up a small support group containing those responsible for the bullying and bystanders.

It aims to get all members of the group to take responsibility for their behaviour and its consequences and to make a commitment to joint action, which will result in an end to the bullying and provide support for the bullied pupil.

It is critical that the parents of all young people involved are contacted, and the approach that is being taken is explained. All too often there is confusion, and feelings that “the school is doing nothing”, if parents are not fully informed.

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

Step one: Interview with those being bullied. When the adult finds out that bullying has happened they start by talking to the person being bullied about their feelings. The adult does not question them in detail about the incidents but does need to know who was involved.

Step two: Convene a meeting with the people involved. The adult arranges to meet with the group of young people 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. The adult tells them about the way the person being bullied is feeling and might use a poem, a piece of writing or a drawing to emphasize his/her distress. At no one time does she discuss the details of the incidents or allocate blame to the group.

Step four: Share responsibility. The adult does not attribute the blame but states that they know 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 person being bullied 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 person being bullied could be helped to feel happier. The adult gives some positive responses but they do not go on to extract a promise of improved behaviour.

Step six: Leave it up to them. The adult ends the meeting by passing over the responsibility to the group to solve the problem. The adult arranges to meet them again to see how things are going.

Check in regularly and informally with the young person/people who are being bullied. Explain what has happened to other relevant staff (lunchtime supervisors, etc.) Communicate frequently with their parents. Assure them that the situation is being closely monitored.

Step seven: Meet them again. About a week later the adult discusses with each young person, including the person who was being targeted, how things have been going. This allows the adult to monitor the bullying and keeps the young people involved in the process.

Concluding remarks

What do you do if there is a serious incident of violence?

When a young person seriously assaults another young person **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 person being bullied and how that might be alleviated.

Surely you need to know exactly what went on?

Think carefully about the level of detail that is required before responding to a bullying incident. But always, always, always take the perceptions of the young person who has been bullied as the starting point for any investigation.

Sometimes attempts to take accurate accounts about the events are likely to stir up further disputes, to increase hostility towards the young person being bullied 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 intensively questioning the participants.

What if only one person who is bullying is identified?

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.

Secretive bullying of one person by another is rare and hard to discover but if it is revealed then the 'support group 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 about young people that provoke bullying?

Some young people with SEND may display behaviours that appear to encourage bullying from their peers (e.g. the provocative "victim").

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 young person being bullied someone may suggest that he or she is encouraged to behave in a different way ... 'we could ask her/him to stop...' That is fine as long as the group take the responsibility to help her/him and the changes are within her/his ability.

Bibliography

ROBINSON, G. and MAINES, B. (2000) Crying for help: the no blame approach to bullying. Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd.

Help us improve this resource

If you have ideas or suggestions that would improve this resource, such as alternative statements, or adaptations to make activities more affective with younger/older learners, or in the context of specific learning difficulties, we would really welcome your suggestions and comments:

Please contact antibullying@afa3as.org.uk

ABA Information Hub: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/1198

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