



## BULLYING

### >> PEER MEDIATION

It has been suggested that 'students are more likely to turn to their peers for help and support when they have interpersonal problems' (Collins et al 2002) and this has led to the introduction of peer mentoring schemes. These can take a variety of forms, for example:

#### **Pupils acting as a Mediator**

In this scheme an older pupil befriends a victim or a bully and supports them in resolving the bullying issue, or a school prefect acts as a mediator between the victim and the designated member of staff responsible for bullying.

This tactic is often used when two friends fall out and can be advantageous in healing short term friendship rifts, but it is less effective when it comes to resolving very serious incidents of bullying and can cause distress for the victim especially if part of the mediation and reconciliation process involves the victim having to tell the bully face-to-face, how they feel as a result of the way they've been treated.

#### **Peer Counsellors**

These programmes need strong teacher involvement and involve training older pupils about the effects of bullying and how to care for younger pupils who may be bullied. Pupils who volunteer for this scheme may be referred to as 'guardian angels' and usually wear badges or ribbons so that others know they have someone of their own age who will take their concerns seriously.

In some schools, a room is set aside where pupils can go to do their homework, play board games or to just chat with others. Pupils who are upset and don't want to approach a volunteer directly can use this room and



if they wish, they can write their concerns and post them into the 'Making it better' suggestion box or they can send an email or a text message to the designated peer counsellor.

#### **The 'Group Work Approach'**

In accordance with good practice models advocated in the Pastoral Care Policy for Schools (DE 2001) the 'Group Work Approach' is based on a 'no-blame' policy and involves talking to the victim, the suspected bully and potential eyewitnesses. In this approach, the victim is interviewed and asked to draw a picture or write a poem about the effect of bullying.

A meeting is then held between a teacher and a group of students (including the bully) as well as those who may have seen the incident/s and others who are not directly involved. The teacher explains to the group how the victim is feeling and the group then offers suggestions to find a solution. The idea here is that because the bully is not being blamed for what they've done, they stop feeling threatened and can be part of finding a solution. Pupils are then encouraged to come up with practical ideas to resolve bullying and each pupil is encouraged to carry out their own solution.



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After one week the group reconvenes to discuss what progress has been made as a means of affording pupils a sense of achievement for their role in tackling this issue.

### Evaluation of Peer Mediation Schemes

Peer mentoring schemes (where pupils act as a mediator or take on the role of peer counsellors) have many advantages. For example,

- pupils benefit by developing conflict management skills which they can use to help the bully understand why their behaviour is unacceptable, take responsibility for their actions and modify their behaviour accordingly;
- teachers benefit from this scheme by helping pupils develop their listening, communication and mediation skills;
- schools benefit from reduced suspensions and expulsions by dealing with a bullying issue before it escalates into a serious problem.

However, Save the Children (2002) point out that the introduction of a peer support scheme needs careful planning and management as the type of scheme introduced will depend on the particular needs of a school. For example, it is possible that a pupil may reveal something important like neglect or abuse to a peer counsellor who may not realise that this information needs to be passed to a teacher. This is why adequate training must be provided for older pupils in regards to the importance of upholding confidentiality, being aware of what issues they need to report to a teacher and what they should say to the pupil who is being bullied.

There are also advantages and disadvantages with the 'Group Work Approach'. On the positive side this strategy alerts pupils in the class to the issue

of bullying and can thus provide a powerful source of support for the victim. This scheme is also preferable to the approach taken in some schools where in their rush to 'do something' about bullying, a 'zero tolerance' policy is adopted without an in-depth analysis of the problem or how the bullying behaviours can be changed. On the negative side, the lack of directive punishment associated with the 'Group Work Approach' may cause some pupils to feel that the bully is not being adequately sanctioned for their behaviours and thus there is no incentive from him or her to change their behaviours.

For peer mediation schemes to be effective, schools must decide, in conjunction with pupils, **WHICH** peer mediation strategy, if any, would best meet the needs of those pupils who want to take a more proactive role in mediating and resolving bullying incidents.

### Further Information

- >> For more information on how to set up a peer support scheme with proper training and safeguards visit the Childline CHIPS service [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk) and the ABA website [www.antibullyingalliance.org](http://www.antibullyingalliance.org)
- >> More detailed information on peer mediation and buddy schemes can be obtained from the Save the Children (2002) 'Focus on Bullying'. Save the Children also recommend reading 'Guidance on Content of Personal and Social Education at Key Stages III and IV (CCEA 2000) which has a useful section on school mentors (pp20-22).
- >> Alternatively, schools may wish to consider School Group Conferencing which helps pupils who engage in bullying to understand how their behaviours negatively impact on others and encourages them to take responsibility for their actions - further details of this scheme can be obtained from [www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)