

11-16 years. Supporting a child with a disfigurement: a teacher's guide

## Guide 9. Teasing, name-calling and bullying

Young people who look noticeable or different in some way – red hair, big ears, wrong trainers – are particularly vulnerable to being on the receiving end of taunts or more subtle comments from their peers at secondary schools. The effects can be very harmful and long-lasting. Many students underachieve or stay away from school and some self-harm.

Pupils with disfigurements such as a birth-mark, a scar or vitiligo frequently experience prolonged and unrelenting harrassment at school. Children with disfigurements are twice as likely to be severely bullied as their counterparts without a visible difference.

Some pupils who have disfigurements have felt that school staff did not take their complaints seriously.

“If it was racist name-calling, the school would be onto it like a shot, but staring or pulling faces at me or calling me Scarface, it just doesn't register with them that this is not okay.”

But teasing, name-calling, ostracism and other more subtle forms of nastiness associated with disfigurement, can be very difficult to deal with. We hope that the following ideas and strategies for supporting a pupil with a disfigurement who is being teased, harassed, ostracised or bullied at school or on the journey to or from school, will help you to respond constructively and effectively.

Although these ideas focus on the work you can do with the pupil who has a disfigurement, you will of course be dealing with offending pupils in accordance with school policy.

### 1 A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

The school's policy documents on behaviour and bullying will set out agreed procedures for dealing with incidents of bullying that arise in your school and should give a strong message to teachers, pupils, parents and governors that any form of bullying will not be tolerated. The aims of the policy will include both to prevent bullying and to make pupils more aware of how to recognise and deal with it.

Teasing, name-calling, bullying and ostracism are less likely to occur if the peer group does not collude with the unkind or cruel behaviour. The strategies outlined below should be used in conjunction with work that enables all pupils to understand the part played by acquiescent bystanders when bullying occurs. Unkind behaviour needs to be criticised and challenged and pupils need to know how to do this appropriately and safely.

Unkind or bullying behaviour towards a pupil who has a disability such as a disfigurement is a disability rights issue. As with other aspects of teaching about equality issues, facial difference can be addressed within many different areas of the curriculum. It is a part of the transmission of values that happens in all areas of learning. See also the *Guide on Working inclusively with groups*.

## 2 WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Unacceptable behaviour will be specified within your school's definition of bullying as set out in your school's policy. However, deliberately hurtful behaviour can be difficult to detect. Teasing, name calling, ostracism, staring and allusive insults can all be directed at someone who looks unusual by others who know how to avoid the attention of staff.

- The jibes are made swiftly, when the teacher's back is turned
- The taunts are non-verbal – a gesture or a glance, shared with other members of the peer group but unnoticed by adults
- The incidents happen on the journey to and from school
- The insult is not direct but allusive – e.g. 'I like to swim in the sea!' directed at a young person who has fused fingers and whose hands are perceived as being like flippers.

It is important to actively look for unkind or bullying behaviour not only because it can be covert, as described above, but also because the pupil being hurt may not report it. There are a number of reasons why a child or young person may not tell school staff (or parents) what is happening:

- Feeling so confused or demeaned that he does not want to tell
- Fear of not being listened to and no appropriate action being taken against the bully or bullies
- Fear of retaliation by the perpetrators for having told
- Fear of a worsened situation, with others ganging together
- Avoiding causing parents to worry
- Not expecting much from the school (or from life)
- Not wanting his appearance to be the focus of any further attention

## 3 SUPPORTING A PUPIL WHO IS BEING BULLIED

Above all the school must address the unacceptable behaviour of any pupil who bullies or directs unkind remarks to another about their disfigured appearance. However, it is also possible to provide the pupil who is being bullied with some potentially useful strategies, outlined below.

The advice to 'ignore it' is not an effective strategy. It will not make it go away. It is likely to reinforce the pupil's sense that school staff cannot help and to increase his feeling of powerlessness. However well intentioned the advice, a pupil should never be told to just ignore comments, teasing or invisible harassment such as persistent staring.

Another well-intentioned but unhelpful response is to say 'perhaps you imagined it'. This can leave the pupil feeling that his experience and perceptions are of no value. It reinforces his feelings of powerlessness and a belief that adults do not know what to do.

When responding in these ways to a pupil who reports unkindness or bullying, what staff usually intend is to encourage him not to take comments to heart, or to behave in a way which shows indifference to the unpleasant behaviour. But in that case good self-talk is a

more effective strategy for increasing resilience, especially if combined with actively deciding to leave an unpleasant situation and seek a more positive setting. See below.

Another difficulty is that staff may perceive a pupil as 'having brought it on himself' with his own inappropriate behaviour. Bullying behaviour must be stopped, regardless of its 'cause'. But it is also worth bearing in mind that a young person may be mishandling interactions with other pupils for various reasons:

- low self esteem
- poor social skills
- difficulties of self-expression
- behaves aggressively or timidly towards his tormentors because previous bullying has not been satisfactorily addressed.

There is no substitute for fully and effectively addressing bullying behaviour. However, when responding to an incident it is important that someone tries to understand the pupil's point of view and to help him to find better ways of managing his interactions with other pupils. This requires time and sensitivity. Self-esteem, social skills and self-expression can be helped over time – see the relevant *Guides*. The following strategies may also be helpful.

## Teach good self-talk

How we think can make a difference to what we feel. Help the pupil you are working with to identify what he is thinking when an unpleasant situation is developing around him. Usually (and very understandably) there will be thoughts such as *I'm scared, I hate them, or I wish I wasn't here.*

Self-talk is a way of replacing a negative thought with something positive – for example, replacing *They make me feel scared* with *I don't need to listen to this.*

Good self-talk affects the way a person is perceived by others – a pupil can use self-talk to appear calm and indifferent rather than upset. Good self-talk also helps to modify the feeling itself so that he feels less of a victim and more like someone who deals with things appropriately. An example of good self-talk would be repeating achievements and reinforcing positive relationships, e.g., thinking – 'I swam fifteen lengths on Saturday.' or 'I'm going with my brother to see Ipswich Town on Saturday.'

## Teach ways of choosing to leave a situation

The best way to manage a nasty situation is often to leave it. It is important to spot trouble developing as soon as possible and not wait for it to start. It is also important to look confident when walking (never running) away. Encourage your pupil to look on this as a positive choice and to walk off in a way that shows confidence, even if they do not altogether feel it. Good self-talk here would be 'I can spend time with people I like' or 'I've made three friends since I came here and I can go and find them.'

It is also important for the pupil to have somewhere or someone to go to when choosing to leave a situation – a definite person or people in a definite place. This can be difficult for a pupil who is in the uncomfortable position of not really having any friends. In this case consider recruiting two or three sensible and helpful pupils, possibly from the year above, to act as buddies. Their job is simply to 'be there' – at an agreed location, on a

rota perhaps – with a friendly response. Encourage them to ask about lessons, homework, what was on TV last night etc if the pupil you are supporting seeks them out.

## Teach fogging

Fogging is a technique for responding to verbal taunts with non-aggressive follow-ons. When someone lobs a nasty or clever-dick comment the pupil with the disfigurement, who has learnt to fog, can answer with some gentle fogging and then take their leave.

Pupil A "Hey, wart-zone, was your father a toad?"  
Pupil B "*Excuse me, is there a problem?*"

Pupil A "You need to see a plastic surgeon."  
Pupil B "*And your point is?*"

The aim is to sound calm and collected, even vaguely interested and friendly, but puzzled by the other person's conversational gambit. Fogging takes practice as well as courage. When practising it is useful to work with several partners and to reverse roles so the pupil you are supporting experiences saying mean things as well as fogging.

Pupil A "The aliens have landed."  
Pupil B "*I'm sorry, I'm not sure what point you're trying to make.*"

Pupil A "Alien, what planet are you from?"  
Pupil B "*It's clear you're trying to make some point here but I'm not sure what it is exactly.*"

Young people with facial disfigurements report that this leaves them feeling competent and satisfied instead of harassed, powerless and humiliated. They can then leave the situation and go on their way, perhaps with a slight, perplexed shrug. The erstwhile tormentor or clever-dick is left as if they have attempted but failed to have a conversation. It has become a non-event.

## Plan for safety before and after school

Any of the skills outlined in this *Guide* may be useful before and after school. You might also consider making arrangements for a pupil to arrive and leave early or late, so as to avoid, for instance, the start and finish times of a nearby school. This however, has the drawback of making the pupil 'different' from everyone else. So in this case it is best to arrange for a small group of 'buddies', or even a whole class or year, to come and go at non-standard times, rather than singling out just one pupil.

## 4 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Four self-help booklets have been especially written by *Changing Faces* to enable older children and teenagers with disfigurements to work through their feelings, learn about other people's reactions to their noticeable appearance, and develop a range of attitudes and strategies to help them. Their full colour interactive format makes them more fun than most self-help guides! These books can be ordered from *Changing Faces*.

***Looking different Feeling good***  
***Do looks count?***

***What happened to you?***  
***You're in charge***

**Kidscape** is a specialist charity concerned with the prevention of bullying and child abuse. It can provide training for children and for those who care for them throughout the UK, to help keep children safe. Kidscape works with children, parents, schools, youth groups, police and social services.

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