

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 school. The effects can be very harmful and long-lasting. Many students underachieve or stay away from school and some self-harm.

Students with disfigurements such as a birth-mark, a scar or condition frequently experience prolonged and unrelenting harassment at school. Children and young people with visible differences are more likely to be severely bullied as their counterparts without a visible difference.

Some students who have visible differences 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 visible differences, can be very difficult to deal with. The following ideas and strategies for supporting a student with a visible difference 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 student who has a visible difference, you will of course be dealing with bullying students 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, young people, parents/carers and governors that any form of bullying will not be tolerated. The policy should also include information and guidelines about preventing bullying and making young people more aware of how to recognise and deal with it.

Teasing, name-calling, bullying (including cyberbullying) and ostracism are less likely to occur if the peer group does not collude with the unkind or cruel behaviour. The strategies outlined below which are aimed at supporting an individual who is being bullied, should be used in conjunction with work that enables all students to understand the part played by acquiescent bystanders when bullying occurs. Unkind behaviour needs to be acknowledged and challenged and students need to know how to do this appropriately and safely.

As with other aspects of teaching about equality issues, visible 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 [A World of Difference resources](#).

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 a young person who looks unusual by other young people who know how to avoid the attention of adults.

According to the NSPCC (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying/>) no single sign will indicate for certain that a child or young person is being bullied, but it is useful to watch out for:

11-16 years. Supporting a young person with a visible difference: a teacher's guide

- belongings getting 'lost' or damaged
- physical injuries, such as unexplained bruises
- being afraid to go to school, being mysteriously 'ill' each morning, or skipping school
- not doing as well at school
- asking for, or stealing, money (to give to whoever's bullying them)
- being nervous, losing confidence, or becoming distressed and withdrawn
- problems with eating or sleeping
- bullying others.

They go on to describe the effects of bullying and state that they can go on into adulthood. At its worst, bullying has driven children and young people to self-harm and even suicide.

Children who are bullied:

- may develop mental health problems like depression and anxiety
- have fewer friendships
- aren't accepted by their peers
- are wary and suspicious of others
- have problems adjusting to school, and don't do as well.

All children and young people who are affected by bullying can suffer harm – whether they are bullied, they bully others or they witness bullying.

How this can happen:

- 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 incidents happen online
- 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 young person being hurt may not report it. There are a number of reasons why a young person may not tell school staff (or parents/carers) what is happening:

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

3 SUPPORTING A STUDENT WHO IS BEING BULLIED

Above all, the school must address the unacceptable behaviour of any student who bullies or directs unkind remarks to another young person about their disfigured appearance. However, it is also

possible to provide the young person who is being bullied with the useful strategies outlined in this Guide.

The advice to 'ignore it' is not an effective strategy. It will not make it go away. It is likely to reinforce the young person's sense that adults cannot help and to increase his/her feeling of powerlessness. However well-intentioned the advice, a young person should never be told to just ignore comments or 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 young person feeling that his/her experience and perceptions are of no value. This can also reinforce their feelings of powerlessness and their belief that adults do not know what to do.

When staff say these things to a young person who reports unkindness or bullying, their usual intention is to encourage them to behave in a way which shows indifference to the unpleasant behaviour or not to take comments to heart. But teaching a young person good self-talk is a more effective strategy for increasing resilience, especially if combined with actively deciding to leave an unpleasant situation and go to a more positive setting.

Another difficulty is that staff may perceive a young person as 'having brought it on herself' by his/her 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 students for various reasons:

- low self-esteem
- poor social skills
- difficulties of self-expression
- behaves aggressively or timidly towards his/her 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 young person's point of view and to help them to find better ways of managing their interactions with other students. 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 student you are working with to identify what they are thinking when an unpleasant situation is developing around them. Usually (and very understandably) the young person will have 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 reaction – for example, replacing 'They make me feel scared' with 'I don't need to listen to this'.

A young person can use self-talk to stop showing that they are upset. The self-talk will also help to modify the feeling itself and help them to avoid falling into the victim role. An example of good self-talk would be repeating achievements and reinforcing positive relationships, e.g. 'I have made three friends since I came here and I can go and find them'.

Teach ways of leaving the 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 student to look on this as a positive response and to walk off in a way that shows confidence, even if they do not altogether feel it. It is also important for the student to have somewhere or someone to go to when leaving a situation. 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 student 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 student who is in the uncomfortable position of not really having any or many friends. In this case consider recruiting two or three sensible and helpful students, 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 they did at the weekend if the student you are supporting seeks them out.

Teach fogging

Fogging is a technique for responding to verbal taunts with non-aggressive follow-ons. When someone makes a nasty comment the student with the visible difference, who has learnt to fog, can answer with some gentle fogging and then take their leave.

Student A "Hey, wart-zone, was your father a toad?"

Student B "Excuse me, is there a problem?"

Student A "You need to see a plastic surgeon."

Student 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 student you are supporting experiences saying mean things as well as fogging.

Student A "The aliens have landed."

Student B "I'm sorry, I'm not sure what point you're trying to make."

Student A "Alien, what planet are you from?"

Student B "It's clear you're trying to make some point here but I'm not sure what it is exactly."

Young people with visible differences 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 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 student 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 student '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 student.

11-16 years. Supporting a young person with a visible difference: a teacher's guide

Create social alternatives to the bullying at school

Many schools have an established system for supporting young people. These can be very helpful when a young person with a visible difference is actively ostracised by others or has not yet acquired the social skills to manage a busy playground.

Organised clubs and activities at lunchtime can give a young person the opportunity to join in with other young people and to be accepted as one of the group.

4 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are some useful websites that provide advice and support on bullying

- Changing Faces 'What is bullying?' and associated resources available at <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/adviceandsupport/self-help/children-young-people/what-is-bullying>
- The NSPCC has useful information on bullying and cyberbullying available at <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying/>
- The Anti-Bullying Alliance [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#)