



FIGHTING FIRE WITH WATER

Dealing with Bullying and Children in Care



Devon County Council Fostering Service



SUMMARY

Introduction

Tackling bullying in children and young people in care is so important because it's not just about handling a series of incidents – it's about shaping their futures. If unchecked, bullying can have long-term effects on their ability to form relationships, and can compound the damage they've already suffered – leading on to prison, homelessness, domestic violence and drug abuse.

Development

Under normal circumstances, the attachments children develop give them positive feelings about relationships – which become a template they use to form future relationships.

Children in care come from backgrounds which give them negative feelings, which develop into a negative template – so their past experiences are likely to influence new relationships.

These negative new relationships make children and young people in care are more vulnerable to being bullied, or to become bullies themselves.

Bullying is all about 'difference'. Children from dysfunctional backgrounds can often be recognised by their peers by their poor clothing, hair and hygiene – making them a target. Others try to get back the power they've lost by becoming bullies themselves.

Definitions

Bullying is the deliberate intention of one person or a group to inflict hurt, over a sustained period of time, on an individual who is not able to defend him- or herself at the time.

Teasing usually takes place between friends, and stops when a child shows distress.

Cyberbullying is 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself'. (DCSF)

Symptoms

The child or young person becomes withdrawn – or their behaviour becomes untypically aggressive.

School absence – threatening situations are avoided with scenarios like 'missed bus', 'tummy ache' and 'headache'. Recognisable patterns can develop.

School work deteriorates.

Analysis

The aim is to help a young person to acquire a new way of thinking and feeling about the world.

That's done not by labelling the child – but by trying to understand the dynamics of what's going on. Don't personalise, analyse!

We need to help them develop resilience – through coping strategies, anger management, and ways of dealing with challenging situations that don't involve 'fight or flight'.

Behaviour

Challenging behaviour can be triggered by something as simple as a sight, sound or smell that can take a child right back to a painful experience in their past.

If an adult responds in a similar way, it's a negative spiral that merely reinforces the child's behaviour – this is 'fighting fire with fire'.

It's not the child that's the problem – it's the problem that's the problem!

So fight fire with water – maintaining a good relationship with the child helps you tackle the problem.

Responses

Schools will act to find out what's happened by talking to both sides, and sometimes witnesses.

Both parties can be brought together to talk things through – bullies are often unaware of the devastating effects of their actions, and stop when made to face up to them.

The 'Circle of Friends' surrounds the young person, and makes sure they're never alone in a school situation. This has the added benefit of extending their social network.

Specific techniques a victim can use: 'bore the bully', 'agree with the bully', 'so what?', 'just say no'.

Aims

Help them to develop the core skills other children pick up in everyday family life – like behavioural, emotional and thinking skills.

Help them to raise their level of educational achievement, increase their self-esteem, build their resilience, and move from being a victim to a survivor.

Help them to acquire the emotional competencies, friendship skills, self-awareness, self-expression and self control that are important for all children – but especially for those in care.

Actions

If you come across a bullying situation – get in touch with the school right away, in spite of the child's reluctance.

Get involved with the school – they'll be happy to work with you.

Be the child's advocate – there's no-one else to fight their corner.

Take advantage of the specialist help available – there's a whole team including your Fostering Social Worker and Support Worker, the child's Care Manager, teachers, the Educational Psychology Service, the Education Welfare Service, and as a last resort, the police child protection team.

Challenge the young person's thinking – get them to concentrate on where they're going, not where they've been.

Encourage positive feelings – that's what will give them the strength to cope with the situation they're in, and to face the future with optimism.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Devon County Council contacts

Education Welfare Officers:

Barnstaple 01271 388567

Exeter 01392 383903

Totnes 01392 386810

Find out more at: www.devon.gov.uk/education_welfare.htm

Educational Psychologists:

Helplines exclusively for foster carers every Thursday afternoon:

Barnstaple 01271 388701

Exeter 01392 686300

Totnes 01803 863481

Find out more at: www.devon.gov.uk/educational_psychology

Exclusion and Re-integration

If a child or young person in care is at risk of exclusion, call the Exclusion team on 01392 383940

National organisations

Childline 0800 1111 www.childline.org.uk

Kidscape 01717 303300 www.kidscape.org.uk

Parentline 01702 559900 www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Samaritans 08457 909090 www.samaritans.org

Websites

Don't suffer in silence

From the Department for Children, Schools and Families, it shows pupils, their families and teachers how to tackle a problem that has gone on for far too long.

www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying/

Safe To Learn - Embedding Anti-bullying Work in Schools

A Summary of the DCSF Guidance - September 2007

www.devon.gov.uk/sc-oct0733009a.pdf

Tackling school bullying

The Government has made tackling bullying in schools a key priority and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has made clear that no form of bullying should be tolerated.

www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/bullying/

Cyberbullying

Specific information from the Department for Children, Schools and Families on this new dimension to bullying that follows young people right into the safe haven of home.

www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying/index.shtml

This information sheet has been produced to complement the DVD 'Fighting Fire with Water'. Download and print additional copies from www.devon.gov.uk/fostering in 'Information for Foster Carers' under 'Training'. For enquiries about the DVD, call Fostering Promotion on 01392 386045.