

Challenging School Bullying with Peer Support

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Bottom Line:

Bullying reflects a combination of family, social, and cultural factors. Peer support schemes can block or prevent the impact of such factors and reduce the likelihood of such violence in schools.

Children and adolescents face strong peer pressure towards bystander apathy in the face of bullying: fear of retaliation by bullies, lack of confidence in their supportive skills, embarrassment at being rebuffed, anxiety that they may say the wrong thing, relief at not being the target, or even enjoyment at someone else's misfortune. In some cases they might even deny that they noticed anything. However, if members of the peer group do offer comfort to the bullied classmate or express in some way that they are not happy about this kind of negative behaviour, then attitudes can shift. It takes courage and there are pitfalls along the way, but there are enormous benefits for the whole school community. In this paper, I explore some of the ways in which systems of peer support can make a difference and offer some explanations about why it does.

What is Peer Support?

Peer support interventions harness young people's potential to assume a helpful role in tackling interpersonal problems in the peer group. Eighty to ninety percent of young people express distaste at bullying behaviour and disapprove of bullies, yet only ten to twenty percent actively intervene to help someone in distress on account of the bullying behaviour of a peer (Salmivalli *et al*, 1996). Around 30% of young people who are the victims of bullying suffer in silence (Cowie, 2002). Peer support offers a system of assistance where young people's potential to be helpful can be fostered through appropriate training and through the support of regular debriefing sessions (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). These systems include *befriending schemes*, where peer supporters are trained to offer friendship or support

in everyday interaction with peers (Carr & Saunders, 1979); *mentoring schemes*, where the peer supporter, usually an older pupil, is trained to offer positive role modelling, raised aspirations, positive reinforcement and open-ended guidance on school matters of concern, through engagement in an encouraging, one-to-one relationship with a younger or vulnerable peer (de Rosenroll, Saunders, & Carr, 1993); *peer education*, where peers offer advice and information about drugs, alcohol and sexual behaviour; and *counselling-based schemes*, where support takes place in specially designated rooms, usually through a system of appointments and over a period of time. In the latter, supervision by an adult with training in counselling usually occurs at regular times. For younger children, there are other classroom-based forms of peer support that include co-operative group work (Dunne & Bennett, 1990), conflict resolution (Cunningham *et al*, 1998; Stacey, 2000) and circle time (Mosley, 1996).

Does Peer Support Work?

There is evidence that peer support is an effective method for improving the quality of peer relationships amongst school age pupils (Cowie, 2000; Cunningham *et al*, 1998; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Stacey, 2000). Surveying over 2,300 secondary school pupils and 234 teachers, Naylor and Cowie (1999) found that the existence of a peer support system was perceived as beneficial to the school as a whole. Eighty-two percent of pupils who used peer support schemes found these helpful in giving them the strength to cope with bullying. In a follow-up study of a sample of the same cohort of pupils (Cowie *et al*, 2002) it was confirmed that many pupils appreciated the provision of a service

to protect their safety, and viewed its presence as a sign that the school was caring. Peer support systems were used and were perceived as helpful by a high proportion of users. Furthermore, peer supporters appreciated the opportunity of addressing a real problem in their school community and being given the skills and structures to tackle it. Peer supporters commented favourably on the usefulness of the communication skills that they learned in the course of training. All peer helpers reported that there were great personal benefits for them through their involvement in the schemes. Another frequently mentioned benefit was a gratifying sense of responsibility. In virtually all of the groups interviewed, the peer supporters spontaneously spoke of their satisfaction in helping to make the school a safer place and commented on their pride in being able to make changes to the systems on the basis of their experience. A frequent comment was that the experience of participating in the peer support scheme had led them to decide on one of the caring professions for a career.

Constraints and Limitations

However, there can be problems in establishing and maintaining systems of peer support. Some adults are reluctant to share power with young people (Naylor & Cowie, 1999), and some school environments can be so aggressive that the work of peer supporters is ineffective (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000). Some peers are hostile and try to sabotage the systems through 'hoax calls and referrals,' 'adverse comments,' 'jealousy at all the attention' or doubts about the capacity of the service to offer help. Teen-age male peer supporters face some derision from peers on the grounds that this type of activity is not manly or macho. Fear of retaliation from bullies is a theme that emerges most commonly from discussions with victimized pupils and it is also a strong factor in the reluctance of bystanders to offer help. Where dissatisfaction was expressed, it often referred to a failure on the part of teachers to acknowledge peer supporters' expertise, a lack of effective supervision or training, or a reluctance to allow peer supporters enough responsibility for their task (Cowie *et al*, 2002).

Theory of Mind and Close Relationships

The successes and drawbacks of peer support in addressing the challenging problem of bullying in schools can be explained by three overlapping models: early relationships within the family, the immediate network of participant roles within the peer group itself, and the cultural context of peer support.

Some psychologists consider that before we can fully understand the nature and complexity of peer relationships during the primary and secondary school years, we must first explore the ways in which pre-school children have formed their own internal models of relationships through their attachment relationships within the family. In recent years, there has also been a growing



Illustration: Joseph Williams

interest on the part of social and developmental psychologists in the child's *theory of mind*. Having an understanding of other people's desires, beliefs and their own interpretations of the world is often referred to as having a 'theory of mind'. It is called a theory because we cannot see or touch the mind so we must make inferences about others' mental states. Theory of mind is a rich, inter-connected web of ideas that takes account of emotions, desires, pretence, deception, beliefs and other perspectives of the world. The theory also forges links between two key domains—the cognitive and the social—with the implication that the two are inextricably intertwined.

Dunn's (1992) research has shown that the development of the child's understanding of mental states is embedded within his/her social world of the family as an interactive network of complex and emotionally charged relationships. The process of talking about feelings and the reasons for actions is also linked to early achievement of theory of mind. Furthermore, she has shown that how loved a young person feels impacts their social adjustment. The growth of social understanding develops out of the child's experience of balancing preoccupation with self against responsiveness to the feelings and emotions of others. She argues that for a young child whose own goals and interests are often at odds with—and frustrated by—others in the family, it is clearly adaptive to begin to understand those other family members and the social rules of the shared family world. Securely attached children are more likely to engage in activities that involve sharing their mental world. This research suggests that the quality of family relationships has a strong influence on the ways in which young people act towards one another and

on the extent to which they will actively demonstrate pro-social or anti-social attitudes and behaviour towards more vulnerable members of their peer group.

We can apply these ideas directly to the issue of school bullying in general and to the impact of peer-led interventions to challenge it. It is well-documented in the literature that children who bully have often experienced difficulties in their close relationships within the family, whether through authoritarian parenting styles or through the experience of domineering behaviour from an older sibling. These children's family relationships are often characterised by dominance and by a lack of warmth and intimacy (Cowie *et al*, 1994; Smith *et al*, 1993). One outcome for at least some children who bully is that they lack empathy for others, possibly since they have had to learn to distance themselves from sensitive feelings of pain and hurt in order to survive emotionally within their families. A substantial proportion of these children become socially skilled manipulators who know how to gather followers around them and how to avoid detection by adults. They do not temper their relationships with others by empathy or sensitive concern for their feelings (Sutton *et al*, 1999).

Peer supporters need to have some understanding of these processes if they are to succeed in changing the behaviour of their peer group towards those who are the victims of such anti-social behaviour. They need to know that they are not only dealing with the leader bullies but also with the cohort of followers that the skilled manipulators have gathered around them. In fact, the evidence from our most recent study (Cowie *et al*, 2002) indicates a shift away from one-to-one counselling-based peer support systems towards those that involve the wider peer group, for example, through patrolling the playground during breaktimes or through actively befriending vulnerable pupils. This leads directly to the next section where we explore the range of participant roles adopted by young people when bullying takes place.

Participant Role Theory

Although early experiences within the family are extremely influential, it is also essential to explore the ways in which the

peer group norms are formed in the immediate context of the school. Increasingly, investigators are turning their attention to the social context within which bullying takes place and the social constructions of the phenomenon that are made by young people from a range of perspectives. Salmivalli *et al* (1996) found that, on the basis of peer nominations, it is possible to assign a participant role to 87% of students present at a bullying episode. In addition to *bullies* and *victims*, these include *assistants*, who physically help the bully; *reinforcers*, who incite and encourage the bully; *outsiders*, who remain neutral and inactive and pretend not to see what is happening; and *defenders*, who provide help for victims and confront the bully. Defenders arise spontaneously within a school group in around 10%-20% of those young people involved, with fewer taking on the defender role during the secondary school years (Rigby, 1997). With the right training and framework, such as those offered in schools with a peer support system in place, this percentage of supportive peers can be increased. Salmivalli (1998) found that children and adolescents in similar or complementary participant roles tended to associate with one another. For example, the level of an individual's aggression may be used as a criterion to judge their eligibility for entry to a gang. Young people are selectively allowed into peer group networks and gradually the network influences the values and behaviour of its members. Defenders of victims and outsiders will often form networks with one another. Victims are more likely to be outside all networks, but where they are in one, they share it with defenders, outsiders and other victims. In fact, peer supporters (more likely to be drawn from the ranks of the *defenders*) often include a substantial number of former victims who have developed empathy for bullied peers and who also, through the practice of peer support, find themselves in a supportive and helpful peer group of similar young people.

Social Cultural Theory

We turn now to the wider context in which young people learn about culturally appropriate behaviour. The norms of one culture can differ extensively from those of another and

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so radically affect the ways in which young people learn to behave towards one another. For example, one culture may place high value on individual achievement where another may stress the achievements of the group. In one culture it is desirable to be aggressive towards others; in another aggression may meet with disapproval. From the social-cultural perspective, young people are viewed as *novice participants* in their culture and their induction into the culture is achieved through shared joint activity. As they come to understand objects and relationships they re-create their culture within themselves (Rogoff et al, 1995).

Rogoff and her colleagues take the perspective that individual development is inseparable from interpersonal and community processes and that individuals' changing roles are mutually defined with those of other people and with dynamic cultural processes. The process is two-way. When individuals participate in shared endeavors, not only does individual development occur, but also the process transforms the practices of the community. To illustrate this socio-cultural model, we can turn to the activities of peer supporters to demonstrate how we might explain some of the cultural changes that take place in school communities as a result of the introduction of peer support systems into the school.

Cowie *et al* (2002) noticed that peer supporters in their study changed over time. There were transformations in confidence and a growing identity as peer supporters. There were also differences that often related to the extent and degree of help that the peer supporters received from others, including the quality of teacher facilitation, parental approval, the extent and relevance of training and debriefing groups, and feedback from other pupils, whether users or potential users. Some male peer supporters struggled with the issue of gender identity; others managed to find compatibility between the role of peer supporter and being 'manly'. Each peer supporter had to co-ordinate his/her individual efforts with guidance from other peer supporters; at the group level, each was guided through training and practices developed by previous peer supporters. There were also links with other systems, such as external training agencies (for example, ChildLine), pressure groups (for example, the Peer Support Forum), and higher education

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(for example, a university-based research project).

Rogoff calls this a process of *guided participation*. The peer supporters did not simply acquire their skills in a vacuum. Rather, they went through a process of personal transformation. In turn, these individual efforts, along with the similar individual efforts throughout the peer support systems in other schools, could potentially influence the historically changing institution of the peer support movement, for example, by being reported in publications that are read by practitioners or participating in conferences on peer support.

By looking at development from the socio-cultural perspective, we can predict that the individual peer supporter develops through participation in an activity and changes in ways that contribute both to the ongoing event (in this case challenging school bullying) and to the peer supporter's preparation for involvement in other similar events in the future (such as training to work in the caring professions as a career).

Conclusion

Peer support systems are now accepted and valued for their contribution to the quality of life in a growing number of schools. In these schools, the pupils overwhelmingly state that they like the presence of a peer support system, they would use the system if they needed to, and would recommend it to a friend in need. Teachers in charge of systems report that their colleagues are for the most part extremely supportive. There are also external signs of acknowledgement from parent groups. There is a strong sense in these schools of confidence in their peer support systems and belief in their usefulness.

The research so far indicates that the key to success lies in a process of flexible monitoring and clear observation of the needs of the potential users. Teachers running the schemes also need to take account of the social context in which they operate

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and to make appropriate use of the situated knowledge that the young peer supporters bring to their task. In this, there is a growing appreciation of the role that young people themselves might play in learning new skills and in reflectively adapting these skills to their particular context.

The phenomenon of peer support offers a rich source of information about the nature of peer group relationships and about the processes involved in change. In this article I have attempted to present some explanatory models that may help us to understand how and why change can be effected. I hope too that they offer some integration at different levels of analysis to include the individual, the family, the school community and the wider social context.

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