



Working with Children and Young People

UK Observatory for the Promotion of Non-Violence



Engaging the Bystander through Peer Support

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Bullying in Schools (1)

- School - arena where the day to day experiences of youth are played out
 - Conflict with peers is a natural part of this
 - Existence of bullying and social exclusion is widespread during childhood and adolescence
- Bullying centres on the systemic abuse of power (Cowie 2002)
- In 2004, ChildLine had 31,000 calls from children wanting support as they were being bullied

Bullying in Schools (2)

- 10-20% of pupils reported being victims of bullying at school at some point during the last 3-6 months
 - 30% suffer in silence (Cowie 2002)
 - Pepler & Craig (2000) found that bullies show contempt for their victims, signalling their social dominance. This reduces the likelihood that the victimised children will retaliate, or that bystanders will intervene to help
- The simplest thing to do is to 'stand by' and do nothing

Standing By....

- The bystander has become a metaphor for modern life, highlighting a general malaise towards getting involved in violent incidences
- Latane & Darley (1964) first documented this phenomenon - Kitty Genovese brutally stabbed to death in front of her New York apartment
- Bystander Apathy - Why didn't anyone help?
- Bystander Apathy has been regularly documented in schools with bullying and violence issues

Bullies, Bystanders and Victims



- Salmivalli et al (1996) argued that it is possible to assign a participant role to 87% of the pupils present at a bullying episode. Salmivalli identified 6 participant roles:
 - Victims
 - Bullies
 - Assistants to the bullies (physically help the bullies)
 - Reinforcers of the bullies (encourage the bullies)
 - Outsiders (remain neutral and pretend not to see)
 - Defenders of the victims (help the victims and confront the bullies)
- 17% spontaneously act as defenders of the victim, and Peer Support Schemes aims to increase this proportion.

The Power of the Peer Group



- Harness the power of the peer group to solve the problems that they have created
 - Adults commonly overlook the possibility that the solution may lie with young people themselves (Naylor et al 2001)
- Boulton et al (1999) found that young people who have a reciprocated best friend are much more likely to be protected from aggressive acts or social exclusion on behalf of the peer group
 - Build on the resources that friends spontaneously offer each other

What is Peer Support?



- Major innovation in engaging the bystander in school bullying and other areas
- Peer Support:
 - involves training young people to work together outside friendship groups to support each other
 - to learn good communication skills, share information and reflect on their own emotions in relation to others
 - to deal with conflict and to help peers relate to one another in a non-violent way (Cowie & Wallace 2001)
- It brings the bullies, victims and bystanders into the same space, with a common goal

Nature of Peer Support

- **Peer Counselling:** Bystanders in the role of pupil helpers are trained to use active listening to support peers
- **Befriending:** Still involve active listening skills but adopts a more informal approach
- **Conflict Resolution:** Structured approach in which bystander in the role of neutral third party assists voluntary participants to resolve their disputes (Cunningham et al. 1998)
- **Youth Parliaments:** actively harness the energies of the bystander in addressing problems (Dalrymple & Hough 1995)

Case Study: Setting up a Peer Support Scheme



- Email Peer Support
- Email helpdesk avoided fears of 'grassing'
- Provided an open space to meet without preconceptions, personalities or boundaries
- Volunteers to schemes were wide-ranging
- PS Scheme - encourage on an equal footing bully, bystander, and victim to stand up and be accountable

Why do you think you would make a good peer supporter?



“When I was in Year 8, my best friend turned against me. We had a stupid fall out in the Winter Term, and for some reason, my whole group of friends then turned against me too. I spent most of break time alone, and nobody wanted to sit next to me in class. I was really unhappy and told my parents but I made them promise not to talk to the school as I thought that would make things worse. By the beginning of the next term it seemed to stop, and everything’s been cool since then. I didn’t know how awful it can be until it happened to me, so I think I’d be good at being a peer supporter as I know what boys are going through...”

(Male Volunteer - VICTIM)



Why do you think you would make a good peer supporter?



“I have always liked school and have never been bullied myself but I do get really fed up with the cliqueyness of (Name) School. If your good at sport then you’re in with the right crowd, but people can be really narrow minded. I’ve seen a few boys in my year have a really tough time. There are a couple of boys who are constantly picked on and most of the time they don’t deserve it all, they’re just unlucky. I’d like to feel that I’m doing something about it, and this is why I’d like to be a peer supporter”.

(Male Volunteer - BYSTANDER)

Why do you think you would make a good peer supporter?



“Last year when we moved up from primary to secondary school I know I bullied quite a few of the kids in my class. Nothing physical, just picking on them and trying to make them feel bad. I guess I look back on that now and feel quite bad, so I’d like to do something positive to make up for it...”

(Male Volunteer - BULLY)

Does Peer Support Work?



- **Peer Supporters:** Those trained in peer support gained great personal benefits e.g. learnt useful social and interpersonal skills, increase in self-confidence, feeling that they were contributing to school life and actively tackling problems (Cowie 1998, Cowie et al 2002, Cowie & Smith, in press)
- **Users of PS Schemes:** Perceived as useful by users through providing 'someone who listens', sense that school cared about them (Naylor & Cowie 1999)
- **Peer Relationships:** No evidence that PS reduces incidence of bullying. However, there is evidence that it works as a preventative measure (Naylor & Cowie 1999) - reduced the negative impact on the victim, and increase in reported incidences
- **School Climate:** 63% of peer supporters expressed the belief that the services was having a positive impact on the school as a whole (Cowie 1998)

Conclusions

- Peer Support alone will not reduce bullying and violent incidences, but as part of a whole school policy, it helps create an environment where bullied children feel safe - and offers strategies to empower them (Cowie 2002)
 - For some very violent situations it may be impossible for peer support to have much impact (Cowie & Olafsson 2000)
 - Lack of quantitative pre- and post- data of whether peer support schemes actually reduce incidence of bullying
- Engaging the bystander is key
 - The power lies within the peer group
 - By informing children about the social roles in bullying situations, it can reduce the audience at violent incidences, thereby lessening the power imbalance
- Taking a Holistic View
 - Greatest achievement of peer support may be encouraging the bullies, bystanders and victims to work together, in a safe environment, towards a common goal (Cowie & Hutson 2005)