

# Using friends to combat bullying



Training children and young people to act as peer supporters, to protect vulnerable individuals from being bullied and to create a more positive climate in their schools could be an important way forward? **Helen Cowie** looks at the evidence.

**T**he issue of school bullying has been widely researched over the past 20 years. We know the damage that being bullied can inflict on a child, causing, for example, low self-esteem, reduced capacity for trust, prolonged absenteeism from school, poor academic attainment and relationship difficulties with peers.

These findings indicate that bullying is a complex process since the individual experience of being bullied is also affected by risk factors, such as

the temperament of the child, his or her previous experiences of loss or rejection, the history of intimate relationships and friendships of the child and the presence or absence of personal resilience.

## The importance of friendship in coping with school bullying

Some children are particularly vulnerable to being bullied, including looked-after children, children with special educational needs and children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some are able to deal with bullying themselves by using their own inner resources or seeking out support from friends. In one **study** carried out in 35 UK schools over a period of two years<sup>1</sup>, the researchers asked 'escaped victims' (those who were no longer being bullied after a period of two years) about what helped to stop the bullying. The escaped victims did not differ substantially from continued victims in terms of their personal characteristics or the type of bullying that they experienced. However, what did differentiate them was their resilience. The pupils who had escaped from being bullied reported a number of effective coping strategies, such as telling someone, actively trying to make new friends and even befriending the bully – strategies which the 'continuing victims' were less likely to display.

The continuing victims had a significantly worse attendance rate at school in this study – a factor that probably only served to isolate them further from their peers. They were also more likely to blame themselves.

Research examining the dynamics of peer group relationships has given invaluable insights into bullying. Using sociometric measures, researchers<sup>2</sup> have identified a number of participant roles in bullying: bullies who are the perpetrators of the oppressive actions; victims who are the targets of the oppressive behaviour; assistants and reinforcers who support the actions of the perpetrators; outsiders who ostensibly bear no responsibility for what is happening and who do nothing; defenders of the victims. Defenders are usually friends of a victim who help them by intervening on their behalf, comforting them, confronting bullies, or seeking adult help, thus making future attacks less likely. Young people who take on the defending role are to be found in all social groups. However, it must be remembered that they are a minority.<sup>3</sup> The source of the defenders' altruistic behaviour has been identified as "empathic emotion towards a person in need" and researchers have argued that empathy-based socialisation practices can encourage perspective-taking and enhance pro-social behaviour, leading to more satisfying relationships and a greater tolerance of stigmatized outsider groups. These findings confirm the view that the quality of friendship is particularly important in buffering the negative effects of bullying. Children whose friends are low in protective qualities have an increased chance of being bullied and also of developing internalising problems such as depression.

A critical way of extending such protectiveness beyond the immediate friendship group is to create contexts where there is optimism and hope that relationships need not be abusive, violent or exploitative.<sup>4</sup> Where friends are lacking, specially trained peer supporters can step in to fill the gap. Schools can facilitate this by developing peer support systems founded on principles of equality, concern for others and empathy for others' feelings.<sup>5</sup> Spanish educators call such community spirit *convivencia*—living and working together in harmony.

## The role of empathy for others' distress

Empathy plays a significant part in the development of morality<sup>6</sup> and can be described as what one feels as appropriate for another person's situation, not



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### Case study 1: How peer support fosters empathy for others' distress<sup>7</sup>

The potential for altruistic pro-social behaviour is present in many young people but they need frameworks with which to express their dislike of anti-social behaviour such as bullying. The growing popularity of peer support systems in schools is a sign that these schemes are meeting a need and providing a vehicle through which bystanders can take action. There is also evidence that peer supporters benefit from the opportunity to help others.

One adolescent boy who had been trained by his school as a peer supporter demonstrated how his experience of being looked after enabled him to help peers who were similarly vulnerable:

"We're the ones that are in care, and it's like we're the ones that people are gonna turn to if they've got a problem...It's like...It's like we're, I don't know, listeners for them." (looked-after young man).

one's own. From this perspective, certain key psychological processes are involved in the interaction with significant adults and peers in the young person's life. The extent to which adults foster (or fail to foster) empathic awareness and a concern for principles of caring and justice is particularly important. Early experiences in the family are of critical influences on the formation of moral principles. However, schools also have an important part to play in strengthening young people's conceptions of right and wrong and in challenging behaviour that is oppressive and unjust.

### Training peer supporters

Peer support systems in schools are flexible frameworks within which children and young people are trained to offer emotional and social support to fellow pupils in distress. Peer support can go beyond the help offered by one person to another; its greater strength lies in its potential to create a cooperative community based on mutual trust, respect, open communication and a willingness to explore past hurts as well as present needs and desires. Peer support is a form of lived morality and encompasses a range of activities and systems within which young people's potential to be helpful to one another can be fostered through appropriate training in such skills as mentoring, active listening, conflict resolution, befriending and the promotion of children's rights to work and learn in a safe environment.

The method of peer support has been established in Canada and Australia since the 1980s and is now used in many countries; for example, in the UK the existence of such systems is **reported in over 50% of both primary and secondary schools**<sup>8</sup> where it is now a widely used intervention to promote emotional health and well-being. Varieties of peer support programs have become more popular internationally in schools as anti-bullying interventions that promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and have the potential to improve pupil safety, emotional health and wellbeing.

Primary school schemes generally involve training certain pupils as buddies or befrienders.<sup>9</sup> They look out for pupils that appear lonely, often in the playground, and offer to play with them or help them; they also report serious fights and conflicts to adults. There may be a "buddy bench" or "friendship stop" where pupils can go in the playground if they would like peer support. In addition, some primary schools incorporate other activities for peer supporters such as leading structured games activities, supporting learning at a homework club, and one-to-one work with very young pupils who need support in learning how to play with others<sup>10</sup>

Secondary school peer support schemes usually involve peer mentors, who may offer support to pupils with difficulties in a "drop-in" room, do group work with a tutor group, offer one-to-one contact with a pupil in need over a period of time, or run a

### Case study 2: Peer support by e-mail<sup>11</sup>

One boy wrote just before the Easter holidays to the email peer support team:

'My friend is sometimes nice to me...but at other times he plays jokes on me and embarrasses me in front of the class...Should we still be friends or should I tell my Mum to call his Mum so she tells him off about it?'

The peer supporters responded:

'How long have you been friends? Is this a recent development? You don't say whether you have told him yourself what effect this has had on you. It may be your opinion has changed since the end of last term so we look forward to hearing what you think.'

The boy wrote back:

'Thanks a lot. We met over Easter and I told him that I don't want to have to be in touch with him anymore, and he said fine and now he ignores me which I suppose is a good thing. But he is one of the cool boys in the class, and I want to be popular like him, because I don't have any other friends.'

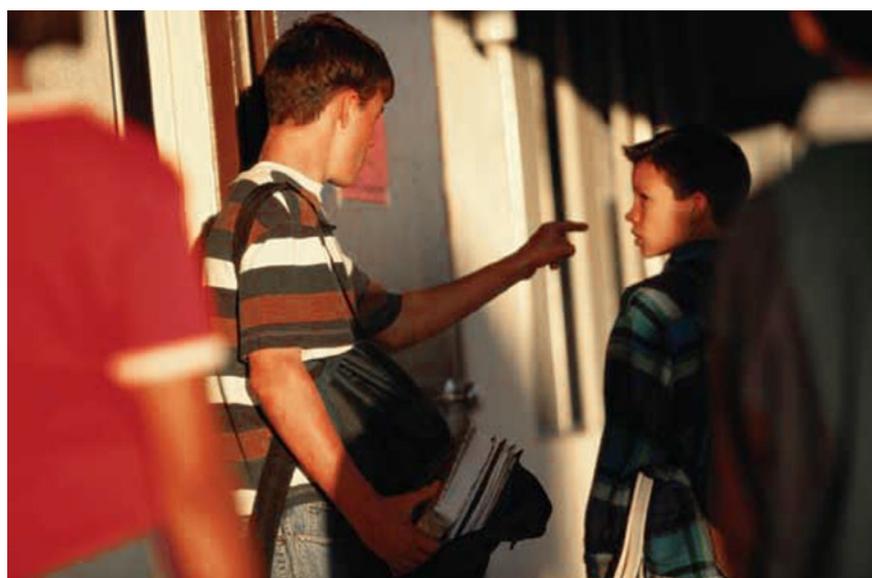
The peer supporters responded:

'It's good that you took the initiative and spoke to him in the holidays. Having this space may be hard at first, but will give you a chance to look for friends who share your interests outside class as well as inside. Let us know how it goes. Write back whenever you like.'

lunchtime club for younger pupils. Peer supporters can also be elected by their peers to deal with interpersonal issues. Some secondary school pupils work as peer mediators to resolve conflicts through a structured process in peer supporters assist participants to resolve their dispute.

Peer support schemes have evolved over time and change in line with local needs and pupil perceptions of the effectiveness and acceptability of this type of intervention. An example of this is the Question and Answer Handout method, developed in Japan, to preserve the anonymity of pupils seeking help. Here pupils communicate their difficulty to peer supporters by means of a confidential post-box. The peer supporters then circulate solutions through a regular magazine or, in some cases, through a peer-led assembly focusing on common problems experienced by the peer-group. With advances in technology, peer support methods now take account of distance-learning types of support, including use of the Internet and email support. Here is an example from a UK school.

Training in peer support generally involves active listening and the skill to respond genuinely and authentically to the needs and feelings of those seeking help. Many training schemes also promote a rational problem-solving stance so that the participants can move into some form of resolution or restitution. This is where good communication skills are essential. There should also be some form of supervision and debriefing to allow time for peer supporters to process what they do and collectively to address the issues that they encounter.



### Evaluation of peer support schemes

Evaluations of peer support schemes consistently indicate advantages. Peer supporters usually report that they benefit from the helping process, that they feel more confident in themselves and that they learn to value other people more. For vulnerable pupils, use of the peer support system can be a critical part of the process of feeling more positive about themselves and dealing with difficulties such as victimisation. Most users of peer support systems report that it is helpful. The degree of helpfulness varies, but a majority would use the service again and would recommend it to a friend in need. Teachers frequently report that the school environment becomes safer and more caring following the introduction of a peer support scheme, and that peer relationships in general improve.

The degree to which the peer support strategy has been integrated into the whole school policy is often a contributing factor to its success. Schools that make pupils aware of the scheme, through the use of assemblies, newsletters, posters and presentations, often find that the scheme becomes more accepted, and the peer supporters earn respect and credibility from fellow pupils. The active support of the head teacher or a senior leadership figure is also a crucial factor, through provision of time and resources for dedicated scheme co-ordinators. The latter can undertake the day-to-day overseeing of the programme, and provide support and continued training for the peer supporters, thus reducing the pressure and responsibilities placed on them.

Additionally, the awareness that peer supporters are there to help appears to enable pupils to create a social construction that school is a safer place to be. Research suggests that for those pupils who know about their school's peer support system one important outcome is that they feel empowered to talk about negative things that happen to them, or that they do to others, with someone else, not necessarily a peer

### Case study 3: How peer supporters help vulnerable children make the transition from primary to secondary school (adapted from Hillel, 2012) <sup>12</sup>

In one school, peer supporters are trained to work in collaboration with teachers and learning mentors to help potentially vulnerable children (identified by teachers in their primary schools) make the transition to Year 7 by providing an induction programme in the summer term before they leave primary school.

The Peer Supporters are matched to the younger students and if possible to those who attended their same primary school. They receive a two-hour training session which provides them with an overview of the programme, information about the programme activities, training on listening skills and leading group activities, and a chance to practise their roles, as well as information about the child that they will be supporting.

Peer supporters also receive basic information on common social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The programme involves enjoyable activities, designed to help the identified Year 6 pupils understand the school layout, routines and expectations, as well as helping them get to know some friendly people in their new school. As one peer supporter commented, "From the moment they arrived, you could sense the enthusiasm growing inside them as they began making friends with one another, and they had infinite questions to ask about the school. Their excitement only increased throughout the day as they began to feel more like a community and included in the school". The main impact of the programme has been the increased confidence of Year 6 students who were previously anxious about making the transition to secondary school, but who by the end of the programme are really looking forward to coming to secondary school.

The programme helps vulnerable students establish and build successful relationships with the peer supporters and the other Year 6 students, which leads to much better integration into the school community.

supporter.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the observation (and in some cases the experience) of the helpfulness of sharing worries and anxieties with another has become an accepted method for coping with issues of concern in that particular school context.

Given the extensive evidence from earlier studies of the impact of peer support training on the young people who take part, there is a case for arguing that peer supporters should be given additional training on how to challenge bullies and bystander apathy as well as the more traditional forms of training in active listening and empathy. A range of different strategies is essential if schools and their pupils are to be successful in the ongoing effort to create and sustain social and learning environments that are friendly and safe.

There may also be an argument for the training to be carried out with a much wider population of young people. Research into peer mediation programmes indicates that training only a small number of mediators is not preventative of violence or

favourable to optimum developmental outcomes and that, as the number of trained mediators grows in proportion to the school population, so school climate effects are more likely. In other words, the extent to which peer support is actually available seems to influence these outcomes.

In the past decade, there has been a shift in the ways in which children in our culture are perceived. This can be seen through policies to enhance the rights of the child, as in the U.K. Children Act (2005), which recognise that children are people, that they should be consulted on decisions that affect them, and that they play an active part in the creation of their social worlds. More recently, researchers have seen the need to record children's own perspectives on the grounds that children themselves are the most important source of evidence on how they experience their lives. In our culture, we do not have a strong track record of listening to children or of understanding children's lives in their own terms and as a primary source of evidence. Nevertheless most of the studies reported here relied extensively on the perspectives of the young people involved in peer support both as users and as practitioners, and this particular field seems to be an ideal arena in which to put more innovative child-centred methods to the test, for example with the peer supporters in the role of active researchers into their own experience. More use could be made of anonymous feedback on the part of users while still respecting the confidentiality of their interactions with peer supporters.

Qualitative responses by peer supporters have indicated their awareness of the moral dilemmas faced by bystanders when they observe pupils being mistreated and abused by peers. The practice of peer support appears to give direction to young people's altruistic wishes to address injustices such as bullying and deliberate social exclusion in their school community. This is the moral stance taken by those bystanders who—unlike the silent majority—are prepared to demonstrate publicly their stance against injustice. The opportunity to be a peer supporter is also viewed by some as an important pathway for the inclusion of children and young people in policymaking, and is central to the vision of initiatives by major charities such as [ChildLine](#), [NSPCC](#) and the [National Children's Bureau \(NCB\)](#). There is great scope within these initiatives for

professionals in education, health and social services to embark on a variety of more thorough studies on the effectiveness of this kind of involvement and participation on the part of young people and to evaluate successes and failures in their implementation. The opportunity to be a peer supporter is viewed by some as an important pathway for the inclusion of children and young people in addressing matters that directly affect them, such as bullying. There is great scope for these initiatives to encourage professionals in education, health and social care to embark on a variety of studies on the active participation of children and young people in their school communities.



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## Footnotes

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## Knowledge trails

- 1) **Empowering the bullied child** – A series of case studies showing how peer engagement, surveys and workshops school support for victims of bullying.
- 2) **Beating the bullies** – How technology slashed the rate of bullying by 75% in one secondary school  
Article available from e-Learning Update in the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription).
- 3) **Anti bullying strategies in school** – An overview of different strategies used to tackle bullying and how effective they are.  
Article available from Leadership Briefings in the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription).