



Dealing with the Bullies: Can Parents Prevent Bullying Behaviour?

Introduction

Bullying is a subjective experience that can take many forms. A broad definition of bullying is “harmful behaviour, carried out by an individual or a group which is repetitive, wilful or persistent and involves an imbalance of power, leaving the person being bullied feeling defenceless. Bullying can be physical or emotional and can include: Name calling, taunting, mocking, making offensive comments, kicking, hitting, pushing, taking and damaging belongings, gossiping, excluding people from groups, and spreading hurtful and untruthful rumours. These actions can take place face-to-face, via third parties, or via other means such as text messages and emails”.¹

Although studies of prevalence vary significantly, it is widely acknowledged that bullying is a serious issue for a significant minority of young people. Hymel, Rocke-Henderson and Bonanno explain that “Although bullying is a common experience for students around the world, it is a complex social problem that can have serious negative consequences for both bullies and victims.”² The ABA confirms that “associated risks (of being bullied) include depression, low self-esteem and confidence, and in severe cases self harm or suicide.”³

A wide variety of different approaches have been piloted over the years to tackle bullying behaviour in children and many schools employ a variety of approaches to safeguard their pupils’ wellbeing and prevent bullying. However, understandable, many of these approaches focus on supporting the victims of bullying, with little invested in supporting children who bully to change their behaviour. This is attributable to a natural sympathy towards victims and a desire to focus resources on the person who is perceived to have suffered the most however does not address the cause of the problem. An ABA survey found “parents expressed highly sympathetic attitudes towards victims of bullying and were supportive of anti-bullying interventions...Parents were generally less sympathetic towards children who bullied, showing little consideration for underlying causes which could explain why a child chooses to victimise others.”⁴

Focus groups undertaken by Parentline Plus in 2005 reported that some parents of children who had bullied felt alienated from anti-bullying services, reporting that services including helplines seem to be geared towards supporting the victims of bullying. These focus groups

¹ Definition from the Anti Bullying Alliance

² Hymel, S, Rocke-Henderson, N and Bonanno, R Moral Disengagement: A Framework for understanding Bullying among adolescents, 2005

³ ABA Briefing paper, Supporting parents in tackling bullying, June 2008

⁴ idib

suggested that parents of children who bully felt as though they could not access those support services. In the summary of the research the researcher noted:

“In general, the assumption was that the information and support available on this topic was for parents/children who were *being* bullied. On top of this, these parents also believed that they would not be wanted or welcomed if they sought help, since their children were causing the problems”⁵

Describing the emotions they felt when they found out about their child’s behaviour, it was clear that many of these parents would have benefited from practical and emotional support and many had an ongoing struggle to change their child’s behaviour. Many of them needed guidance and external support; otherwise their actions were doomed to fail as they had tried everything they could think of to support their child to change.

“You try things, they don’t work and you think, then what? I’d have tried anything”⁶

There is considerable research into bullying behaviour, its roots, its impact on both bully and victim, and methods of preventing and dealing with bullying behaviour. However bullying persists and its impact on victims remains in many cases profound. This report looks at some of the limited research that exists around the interaction between the bully and their family and makes the case for these families struggling with bullying behaviour needing additional support to stop bullying behaviour once and for all.

Parentline Plus’ Data

Bullying is a significant issue for those who experience it and can be extremely difficult for both the families of children who are being bullied and the families of children who are bullying others. Through our various web, telephone and face to face services, Parentline Plus, part of the Family Lives group is in contact with and working to support many families in both of these situations.

Between October 2008 and April 2010 Parentline Plus’ free 24 hour helpline received 67,983 long calls of which 3,331 calls concerned bullying. This amounts to 5% of all long calls to Parentline Plus.

In 89% of the cases that callers rang Parentline Plus about, the perpetrator was known to the victim (2,967 out of 3,331). In 8% of these cases, the caller’s child was the perpetrator involved. Table 2 summarises the results and Table 3 shows a breakdown of the perpetrator relationship to the victim. 68% of the perpetrators come from the school environment, either from the same class or pupils from other classes. The “friends” category includes ex-friends and ex boy/girlfriends.

Table 2- Perpetrator

Type	01/10/08 - 30/09/09	%	01/10/09 - 30/04/10	%	01/10/08- 30/04/10	%

⁵ p 19 Research into Bullying Prepared for Parentline Plus, Sue Pedley, November 2005

⁶ ibid

Known perpetrator	1685	91	1282	86	2967	89
Caller's child is perpetrator	120	7	129	10	249	8
Total calls about bullying	1847		1484		3331	

Table 3- Known Perpetrator

Type	01/10/08 - 30/09/09	%	01/10/09 - 30/04/10	%	01/10/08- 30/04/10	%
Classmates	593	38	441	34	1034	36
In same school (younger or older)	471	31	431	33	902	32
Friends	98	6	69	5	167	6
Teacher/ teaching assistant	52	3	40	3	92	3
Neighbour	40	3	28	2	68	2
(Step) Parent	25	2	8	<1	33	1
(Step) Brother/ sister	21	1	45	4	66	2
Other people	16	1	11	1	27	1
Dorm/ residencies	9	<1	4	<1	13	<1
Local gangs	5	<1	12	1	17	<1
Manager/ work	4	<1	0	0	4	<1
Older relatives	3	<1	9	1	12	<1
New person in school	2	<1	0	0	2	<1
CCTV	1	<1	0	0	1	<1
Did not say/ not known/ missing data	196	13	184	14	380	13

Parentline Plus' statistics show that in the majority of the cases where the parent has called Parentline Plus to talk about their children's bullying behaviour, it involves the perpetrator bullying at home (possibly because it is more evident to the parent) either their younger siblings or in some cases their parents (Table 4).

Table 4- Perpetrator by Location

01/10/08 - 30/09/09	School	Home	Socially	Other
Known perpetrator	1311	166	129	79

Caller's child is perpetrator	40	68	8	4
01/10/09 - 30/04/10	School	Home	Socially	Other
Known perpetrator	1036	101	99	46
Caller's child is perpetrator	50	69	6	4
01/10/08- 30/04/10	School	Home	Socially	Other
Known perpetrator	2347	267	228	125
Caller's child is perpetrator	90	137	14	8

The helpline statistics paint a picture of a significant issue for parents concerned both about their child's behaviour when they discover they have been bullying, and more commonly their child's experience of being bullied. However despite 8% of all calls being from parents when their child is a bully, many more families could be concerned about this issue but do not feel that helplines would be interested in hearing from them.

Research is clear that the line between the bully and the bullied may not be so clear cut, and that retaliation may lead some victims to engage in bullying behaviour. (Haynie et al, 2001) It is clear in some of the question and answers to Parentline Plus's Be Someone To Tell (bullying) website that this is a source of confusion for families:

"My child has been displaying some negative behaviour at school recently. This involves spitting and throwing sand. He tells me other children are not nice to him. How can I tell if he is being bullied and therefore retaliating or the problem lies with him? He has come home with scratches and bruises, but so far I have put it down to boys playing rough." Parent

It is also clear that despite the parent's view that the behaviour may be in retaliation, there is a desire for help to ensure that the bullying behaviour stops:

"My 13 year old son has progressed from being "bullied" to being a bully. His behaviour has deteriorated over the past 12 months or so - lies, poor academic marks, and fights at school and so on. My wife and I need help - we have no idea what we are doing wrong or how to rectify this behaviour. Any suggestions would be much appreciated." Parent

The family characteristics of children who bully

There are a limited number of studies that look in varying levels of detail into the relationship between family and parental relationships and bullying behaviour.

Some authors have identified a link between particularly harsh disciplinarian parenting styles and bullying behaviour in children. Griffin and Gross find "Some research indicates that bullies are often exposed to harsh or aggressive child-rearing practices (e.g corporal punishment) and inconsistent parental discipline strategies (Carney & Merrell, 2001)"⁷ Smith points to low parental monitoring and low levels of parental affection as common

⁷ R.S Griffin, A.M Gross, Aggression and Violent Behaviour 9 (2004) 370-400

family characteristics of children who bully⁸. He also identifies that a family background and a “view of relationships that positively values aggression and bullying as a means of achieving power and influence in a tough environment” can be characteristics of the families of bullies.

Whilst some researchers point to family background as a causal factor in bullying behaviour, others see a more complex picture. Hymel, Rocke-Henderson and Bonanno believe that family background does play a role, but that other factors also determine whether or not a child will bully: “A growing body of research suggests that bullying and peer harassment emerge as a result of a number of different factors, not just one. Such problems are not *solely* the result of individual characteristics of the student, poor home environments, ineffective parenting and school practices.”

There is a school of thought which suggests that the link between a child’s family circumstance and their bullying behaviour is a more simplistic one in which the child is acting out a set of behaviours which are deemed acceptable at home. Renae Duncan cites Oleweus in the journal “Bullying Special Edition Contributor” and states: “Overall the need for power and dominance in the family is expressed through verbal and physical aggression between parent against bully, bully against sibling and bully against peer. The aggressiveness of the bully is not only tolerated by the parents but may be a reflection of the bully’s family values and family environment.”⁹

Junger-Tas and van Kesteren’s 1999 study concluded that there is a link between absent fathers and bullying, with young men without fathers at a slightly elevated risk of bullying others.¹⁰

Whilst there are many different pieces of research from around the world suggesting that different family circumstances and parenting styles are more or less likely to lead to children displaying bullying or challenging behaviour, it is clear that not all children who grow up in these circumstances engage in such behaviour.

Rationale for working with the families of children who bully

It is also clear that the outcomes, both for children who are bullied and for children who bully others, are significantly poorer than for children who do not bully others and are not themselves significantly bullied.

“The negative effects of bullying are well documented, not only in terms of the psychological harm that is inflicted upon victims, but also in terms of the maladaptive outcomes for children who engage in bullying.”¹¹

Evidence identifying bullying as a predictor of conduct disorders and an elevated risk factor for future criminal behaviour is a compelling motive for intervening early by offering

⁸ Smith, P.K Bullying: Recent Developments in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Volume 9, No 3 2004 pp98-103

⁹ Duncan, R.D Family Characteristics of children involved in bullying

¹⁰ Junger-Tas, J and van Kesteren, J, Bullying and Delinquency in a Dutch School population, 1999

¹¹ Hymel, S, Rocke-Henderson, N and Bonanno, R Moral Disengagement: A Framework for understanding Bullying among adolescents, 2005

children who bully and their families help and support, in an effort to prevent both future bullying episodes (and thereby preventing poorer outcomes for potential victims) and to mitigate against future criminal behaviour.

Negative Outcomes of Bullying Behaviour

- Criminal behaviour, mental health problems and suicide as potential outcomes for both victims and perpetrators of bullying behaviour, and particularly for those who are both a victim and a perpetrator of bullying.
- Children who bully are more likely to be excluded from school, with research in the late 90's by the Social Exclusion Unit suggesting that 30% of exclusions are attributable to bullying, fighting and assaults on peers and 15% due to verbal abuse.¹²
- New Philanthropy Capital estimate the cost to the taxpayer of excluding a pupil from school to be £44,468 over the course of that pupils' lifetime in 2005 prices¹³.

It is clear that working with children who bully and their families to reform their behaviour and enabling them to stay in school would avoid both the economic cost and the waste of human potential.

Bullying Behaviour and Special Educational Needs

Children with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely to be the victims of bullying behaviour. The Department of Children, Schools and Families 'Safe to Play' in 2008 found that young people with special educational needs were three times more likely to be bullied 'a lot' in schools and in the community than their peers. However, research shows that children with a particular SEN diagnosis of ADHD are also proportionately more likely to display bullying behaviour.

Additional research by Holmberg and Hjern, also confirms this showing: "This population-based study demonstrates a connection between ADHD and bullying in schoolchildren. Children diagnosed with situational or pervasive ADHD in fourth grade report being active bullies about three times as often and being bullied 10 times as often as other children."¹⁴

Their research is backed up by Unnever and Cornell who find that: "Because many children with ADHD exhibit problems with aggression and have a relatively high incidence of comorbid Conduct Disorder (25%) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (33%) (Brown et al., 2001), they may be likely to engage in bullying. Other symptoms that might increase the likelihood of victimization include poor social skills, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem."¹⁵

¹² Social Exclusion Unit, 1998 Truancy and School Exclusion report

¹³ Misspent youth: The costs of truancy and exclusion, Martin Brookes, Emilie Goodall & Lucy Heady, 2007

¹⁴ Holmberg, K and Hjern, A Bullying and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in 10-year-olds in a Swedish community, *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology* Volume 50, Issue 2, Article first published online: 20 DEC 2007

¹⁵ Unnever, J and Cornell, D, Bullying, Self Control and ADHD, *JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE*, Vol. 18 No. 2, February 2003 129-147

There is a substantial difference between ADHD and simple bad behaviour: “ADHD is regarded as a condition that is present at birth or becomes manifest very early in childhood (Barkley, 1998), whereas low self-control is theorized by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) to result from deficiencies in child-rearing practices.”¹⁶

For many parents, managing the behaviour of a child with ADHD proves impossible without some form of external help and support, and sadly many families do not have access to that support. Pupils with SEN are over 8 times more likely to be permanently excluded than those pupils with no SEN¹⁷.

Our Experiences on the Ground

In a three year pilot project “Be Someone to Tell” Parentline Plus, part of the Family Lives group, received funding from the Department for Education (formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families) to work with the wider family to tackle bullying behaviour. This work encompassed many aspects, including web, media and policy elements and also local services. In Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire two different local approaches were taken to mitigate against the impact of challenging and bullying behaviour. In Hertfordshire, one element of the project aimed to prevent bullying and difficult behaviour in school children by working to support their families to manage and change their child’s unacceptable behaviour. That work will form the focus of this report. In Gloucestershire, amongst other activities, there was a focus on reducing the impact of bullying by working with families to build emotional intelligence and resilience in their children, enabling them to resist and cope with bullying behaviour in others and prevent them from treating others in a way they did not wish to be treated. Subsequent briefing reports will look in more detail at that element of the project.

The Be Someone To Tell project ends in March 2011 and a formal evaluation of the work has not yet been undertaken. However, a process of monitoring, feedback and learning has been ongoing and forms the basis of this briefing. Feedback from the families of those children who were on the point of exclusion because of their bullying and challenging behaviour, has shown that learning some new parenting skills and different approaches to communicating with and disciplining their child has helped a number of families to turn their child’s behaviour around. In some cases, this change in their child’s behaviour has bought them to a point where they do not have a negative impact on their fellow pupils and therefore prevented them from being excluded.

Parents Stories- how intervention works

Case Study 1

Sarah* tells the story of how she has experienced bullying from both sides of the coin – as the mum of Joseph*, 12, who, until he was diagnosed as having Attention Deficit

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ “Pupils with SEN (both with and without statements) are over 8 times more likely to be permanently excluded than those pupils with no SEN. In 2007/08, 33 in every 10,000 pupils with statements of SEN and 38 in every 10,000 pupils with SEN without statements were permanently excluded from school. This compares with 4 in every 10,000 pupils with no SEN.” DCSF SFR 18/2009 July 2009
http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/SFR18_2009.pdf

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), was involved in bullying while at primary school, and as the mum of Ellie*, nine, who has been bullied at school.

Until Joseph was diagnosed with ADHD, Sarah felt that the school was not listening to her or supporting her son. She felt very lonely and helpless:

“Before Joseph was on medication, if a child wound him up then he would retaliate physically. There was one incident which I only learnt about later from another parent where Joseph was chasing another pupil around with a pair of scissors. I also only then found out that Joseph had clashed with this same boy all the way through school. I wish the school had told me about this. As soon as I was aware of what was going on in school I sat down with Joseph and told him that if anyone wound him up then he should not get involved but should go and tell a teacher. He did this, but this then made him a target as children knew that if they taunted him he could not retaliate.”

But then things changed when Joseph got diagnosed with ADHD, after she shared her concerns with the school nurse, who arranged for Joseph to be assessed.

“The nurse was brilliant and arranged for Joseph to be assessed. He was diagnosed with ADHD, which although I expected as such still came as a blow to me. He was given medication and this has made such a difference. His teacher in his final year at primary school was brilliant and they bonded really well and his grades went up.”

Now, Joseph is at secondary school and is enjoying life and school much more. With some support from the school and his parents, things have changed for the better. They have found ways of coping with difficult situations.

“At school, if he feels he is getting worked up he shows his teacher a special card and they let him go off to a bungalow in the grounds where trained staff talk to him and help him calm down.”

“I still have to handle things carefully. If he comes to me with a problem he needs to physically see me talking to someone about it before he believes that I have listened to him and taken his concerns seriously. If I can't do this then I will ask the person I have spoken to then speak to Joseph and say that I have spoken to them and tell him what they are going to do. If I didn't do this he would feel that this was an injustice.”

I came into contact with Parentline Plus when they came to the transition evening when Joseph was going from primary to secondary school. I got on really well with one of their staff and I ended up going on a few courses, which have been very helpful. I know a few parents now who are struggling a bit and I have urged them to contact Parentline Plus – it's the best thing I ever did.

It's my dream to get some sort of support group going at school, especially at primary school, where I don't think they have the funding to give the necessary support to children with behavioural issues and their families. It would be so nice to go and meet parents in similar experiences and just cry or get it off your chest – anything as a release from all the pressures you come under.”

* Names have been changed to protect this family's identity.

Case study 2

Sandra Woods, 37, of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, was called into her son Jamie's school when he was 14 she was appalled at what she saw and heard.

"The school told me that Jamie had no respect for anyone or anything. Worse, they showed me video footage of him violently kicking another boy in a completely unprovoked attack. I felt sick as I watched Jamie beating up another boy. It broke my heart to think my son was a bully."

While the image of the school bully is often of a thug who rounds on innocent victims as Jamie did with seemingly no provocation, the truth is often more complex. And as in Jamie's case, the reasons behind what turns a child into a bully are often complicated and difficult to identify.

Jamie had previously been bullied himself as his ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) made him an easy target for bullies in primary school. It also meant that he, like many children with this condition, was far more likely to vent his frustrations on those around him and in turn end up in trouble. Jamie's younger sister Alice was also being bullied in school.

"Jamie was an easy target for bullies when he was young, as children knew exactly how to wind him up. Instead of ignoring them he would rise to their bait and shout abuse back. As no-one else would admit to what had gone on Jamie would always be the one in trouble for being badly behaved."

Although Sandra was initially unaware that Jamie was starting to gain a reputation as a bully in primary school, over time she began to realise something was wrong.

"Jamie would come home one day excitedly telling me that another boy had invited him to his house to play, but the next day he'd be in floods of tears saying he wasn't allowed to play there. I'd try inviting the boy back to ours but the offer would always be declined. Although the parents were always very nice to my face I started to realise Jamie was getting a reputation as a bully and the other children were being told to stay away from him."

Sandra visited the school to try to find a way to help Jamie, but found them initially unsupportive.

"I explained he wasn't a naughty boy, he had behavioural problems. But although I was convinced Jamie had ADHD the school just thought he was badly behaved. Despite my requests they didn't seem to have a plan to help Jamie reintegrate with the other children and help him shake this label off."

In Year 5 Jamie was diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed Ritalin, which at first seemed to calm his anger down. But feeling isolated and worried about how Jamie would cope in

secondary school, Sandra went along to a transition meeting at the school. There she met Sara Hassell, a Parentline Plus support co-ordinator of an anti-bullying project in Hertfordshire. The project supports parents, pupils and schools in identifying and preventing bullying.

“It’s so lonely when your child is the one with behaviour problems or is being labelled a bully. Before I felt like the worst mother in the world but meeting Sara was the best thing that ever happened.”

As well as giving Sandra one to one counselling, Sara put her in touch with a growing group of parents who were also in the same situation. “It felt such a relief to be able to talk to people in the same boat as me and realise I wasn’t alone.”

While initially Sandra’s fears that Jamie’s behaviour would grow worse when he reached secondary school were unfounded, in Year 8 she was repeatedly called in as his behaviour became increasingly aggressive to other pupils. After the assault Sandra witnessed on CCTV Jamie was excluded from school for two days.

“I asked Jamie why he’d done what he’d done. He kept saying he didn’t know why and refused to give me a straight answer. I told him it broke my heart but from what I’d seen those were the actions of a bully. There is no worse feeling for any parent who has brought their child up to know the difference between right and wrong than to admit he or she is a bully.

Jamie was horrified at first, shouting ‘I’m not a bully’ and stormed out of the room. When he finally calmed down he kept repeating ‘I’m not a bully’. I explained we needed to work together to sort things out.”

With Sara’s support Sandra went on a number of parenting courses to help her deal with Jamie’s anger. Over time she’s seen a gradual improvement in Jamie’s behaviour.

“Things have calmed down dramatically at home and in school and now I feel we are making slow progress. With Sara’s support I feel as though we are definitely making some headway. Because of Jamie’s ADHD I know his behaviour is always going to be challenging, but his behaviour towards the other children is improving and hopefully over time he’ll be able to lose the stigma of being labelled a bully and be known for who he is.”

Case Study 3

Emma* talks about her experience of learning skills to help manage her child’s behaviour and how she successfully diverted him away from the path he was on and almost certain exclusion from school:

“I am 33 years old and have been a police officer for 12 years. I am married to Nigel*, he is an engineer and we have lived together for ten years. We have two children together, Mark* 7 years and Rachel* 4 years. Life has been good for us, I have always considered us a

well grounded family from good backgrounds. Together we have worked hard to build a nice home and provide for our two children who we love dearly.

I'll be honest, I used to have quite an arrogant attitude towards varying conditions in children, such as ADHD, and would wrongly assume that the condition was down to bad parenting and lack of discipline and control. How wrong could I have been? I suppose it has taken me time to acknowledge the fact that Mark has this condition, or maybe my own personal attitude towards it, but thank goodness I took the decision to contact Parentline.

Mark was always a demanding child from the moment he was born, I just accepted this as the 'norm' and thought that all children were like this. As Mark has grown up I have found his behaviour becoming all the more challenging, especially coming into year 2 at school.

To be fair to Mark's school, they have been extremely supportive with varying learning support plans and reward schemes over the last two years. The school has made comment that Mark is very bright and does not struggle academically. During the past 6 months Mark has become more frustrated in himself and has been struggling to cope with going to school. I had seen my beautiful, vibrant little boy just falling to pieces in front of me and it was breaking my heart.

One of the parents at the school suggested that I speak to Sara from Parentline. I contacted Sara through the school and arranged a series of one to one session with her. These were a course of six sessions lasting one hour each. I wouldn't want to sound cliché, but I can honestly say that I have never looked back...Every aspect of the way I now interact with Mark has totally changed. It was never a case of what I was doing wrong, but to introduce new ways of actually listening and speaking to him.

We were at the point a few months ago where it was inevitable that Max would be excluded from school. After following advice from Sara I have managed to get Mark back on the right track. ... I have my beautiful little boy back. He is not in danger of being excluded and most importantly he is doing well at school and is happy."

* Names have been changed to protect this family's identity.

Implications for policy

Whilst much of the focus of anti-bullying work is rightly on the victim and preventing bullying before it occurs with whole school interventions, there is also a need to focus particular attention on a child perpetrating bullying behaviour when that behaviour occurs. Doing so can help prevent the child bullying from using hurtful behaviour towards others in the future, can avoid the expense and human cost of exclusion and the potential negative outcomes that are associated with bullying behaviour such as future criminal behaviour.

In many cases, the families of children who bully want and need help to turn their child's behaviour around. These families do not feel that anti-bullying help is available to them, and particular support and interventions must therefore be designed to ensure that those

families can access the information and support that can help them to work with their child's school and change their child's behaviour. Services now, can help prevent costly problems in the future.

The families who have worked with Parentline Plus, part of the Family Lives group, as part of the Be Someone to Tell project have found that with the support of a dedicated parent support worker they can turn their child's life around and divert children as young as 6 years old away from a certain path to permanent exclusion. Others have found that Parentline Plus' extended telephone support service has helped them to manage their child's behaviour, and for others group telephone and one-to-one support sessions have been invaluable. In some cases this peer to peer support has helped a parent to succeed after a more formal state run parenting course has failed and undermined their confidence as a parent.

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