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Striking back against bullying

Children with SEN are amongst the most likely to be bullied at school. **Richard Pigg** examines this troubling situation and asks what we can do to support those who need us most

It was not surprising to note that Brian Lamb's report on SEN and parental confidence, published late last year, referred to the problem of bullying. Bullying of children with SEN is more prevalent than it is for their peers. The report states that it damages self-esteem and undermines a child's potential and ability to learn and progress. It also commented on some of the strategies to deal with the issue. Indeed, one specific recommendation of the report was that "the DCSF [now the Department for Education] reviews the effectiveness of a range of approaches to preventing and tackling bullying of children with SEN and disabilities and invests further in those with the most impact."

The purpose of this article is to outline the problem of bullying for

young people with SEN in more detail, add to the debate on what needs to be done, and propose some solutions for how to tackle the issue in schools and communities.

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Is the bullying of young people with SEN any different from other bullying? Mencap research has revealed that 82 per cent of children and young people with a learning disability have experienced bullying (Bullying Wrecks

Lives, Mencap, 2007), and others state that young people with SEN are twice as likely as their peers to become targets for bullying (Bullying Today: A Report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2006).

While most studies have focused on the prevalence and likelihood of bullying for those with SEN, Beatbullying finds it more useful to look into the intensity and persistency of this bullying. Our analysis into the experiences of more than 4,000 young people revealed that children with disabilities or SEN only recorded a slightly higher incidence of being bullied. However, when we broke the bullying down according to its intensity, we found that children with SEN were significantly more likely to experience persistent bullying compared to children without a disability. These children disclosed that

the bullying would occur on a daily basis, or several times a week, as opposed to isolated, less frequent attacks. Children with SEN also reported longer periods of being bullied. When asked to put a timeframe on the period for which they had been bullied (ranging from days to years), twelve per cent of children with SEN said they have been bullied for over a year compared to six per cent of children without SEN. Put simply, the bullying of children with SEN is more persistent and frequent and lasts for a longer period of time.

In many respects, the bullying of young people with SEN is no different from other types of prejudiced based bullying. They are bullied for being different and are targeted because of their needs. However, the bullying can be compounded by the fact that these young people might be segregated from their peers, either by class or by work schedule, they might find it harder to make friends or join in activities, they may not understand what bullying is and, crucially, they might find it harder to tell people about it and seek help.

Has the problem changed in recent years?

Arguably, we are now more aware of the problem of vulnerable young people being bullied and the impact it has on their self-esteem, the ways in which young people with SEN see themselves, and their ability to fulfill their potential. In 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published Safe to Learn guidance specifically aimed at tackling bullying involving children with SEN and disabilities, and followed it in September 2009 with Make Them Go Away, a DVD and a resource pack for schools. Yet the problem is constantly evolving, and one area that is causing new and potentially more serious problems for young people with SEN is cyber bullying.

Cyber bullying – the use of new technology, in particular mobile phones and the internet, to deliberately bully, threaten, hurt, humiliate, harm or harass someone else – is a growing malaise for all children, but again, particularly



for vulnerable groups of young people, including those with SEN. Beatbullying research from 2009 showed that nearly one in three eleven to sixteen-year-olds had been cyber bullied, and for one in thirteen, the bullying was persistent. In

are less visible, and they can use email and social networking sites to communicate and socialize with other young people with more confidence and in a way that many struggle to do offline. However, if their SEN is known, and

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correlation to our earlier findings, the risk of persistent cyber bullying was greater among certain traditionally vulnerable groups of children. While the overall incidence of cyber bullying differed little for children who had a statement of SEN, when it came down to persistent cyber bullying, sixteen per cent had experienced this more intense form of bullying, compared to just nine per cent of "non-vulnerable" children.

Young people with SEN are more vulnerable than others to being bullied online, as they are offline. It should be noted, though, that for some the internet is a great leveler. Their disabilities

often bullying will migrate from offline to online, then some young people will be bullied because of their SEN and their perceived difference, as they are offline. In addition, some young people with SEN will experience an exclusion of access to new technology, either finding it harder to use or not being able to access it as other children might. It is broadly accepted that young people with limited access to the internet and/or with limited experience are likely to be at risk of being more vulnerable when they are online (they are not confident online, not aware of aspects of the new technology, and have a limited understanding of

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the dangers). To compound matters, the vulnerability of a child with SEN is also reflected by their capacity to cope with or be resilient in the face of bullying (online and offline), when it happens.

Strategies to tackle bullying and cyber bullying

Despite the DCSF guidance, many teachers are simply not given enough training to be able to understand how to help prevent pupils with SEN being bullied, and what to do if there is a situation. Signs such as changes in behaviour, or becoming distressed, can be interpreted as signs of their needs rather than bullying. Children with a learning disability find it hard to report bullying, and can find it difficult to describe what has happened. When this leads to their reports not being acted upon, it can further deter children from reporting incidents in the future.

On a more positive note, bullying prevention programmes are increasingly being introduced into schools across England with proven success. In schools where Beatbullying has worked, teachers are reporting an average of a 43 per cent reduction in the number of incidents of bullying one year on. We know from our experience in working with young people over the last ten years and from published research that young people are more likely to respond to

advice and guidance from their peers, and therefore a lot of our work utilises peer mentoring.

In 2009, we launched CyberMentors, an online peer mentoring service for young people being bullied or with a problem affecting their wellbeing. Young people are trained as CyberMentors to be able to give support to their peers online (as well as offline), while qualified counsellors are available to offer further support or intervention as necessary. Young people with SEN need help and support to overcome the obstacles and problems they are facing, and for those who might find it hard to disclose being bullied, it is a strategy that can be particularly effective. Almost six per cent of the service users on the CyberMentors website have a statement of SEN, and their feedback is that they have found it easier to talk to someone their own age and that the internet has given them a level of distance or anonymity that has made it more conducive to disclosing and seeking help. Such bullying prevention programmes also impact positively on those participating and help to reduce incidents of bullying in schools and communities where it is embedded.

A year after launch, the Government is now supporting the programme to see how it can have more of an explicit impact on supporting young people

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with SEN, so that they benefit from the mentoring role as well as from the support provided.

Beyond support, all young people, and in particular vulnerable children, need bullying prevention programmes to help them challenge and define their own behaviour. These programmes help children understand the problem, recognize and define what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, and realise the impact and consequences of bullying. Such initiatives can also help them to empower themselves to challenge bullying behaviour, increase their own self confidence, support their peers and tackle bullying in their own schools and communities.

If we can provide training for both the young people and those professionals working with them, couple it with effective reporting mechanisms and referral systems for when bullying occurs, and continue to raise awareness of the bullying problems faced by young people with SEN, we should expect to see a decrease in incidents in the future.

SEN

Further information

Richard Piggin is Deputy CEO of Beatbullying:
www.beatbullying.org

For information about the Cyber Mentors programme, visit:
www.cybermentors.org.uk



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