Anti-bullying support groups

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Introduction

Long-term bullying is often viewed as a difficult and intractable problem. As a result

the resolution of bullying is generally expected to be a difficult and long-term task.

Parents requesting help do not usually expect a totally successful outcome, and certainly

not quickly - they are more likely to be hoping merely for some improvement in a

desperate situation.

Following government guidance first issued to schools in England in the 1990s,

funding was made available for local education authorities to appoint anti-bullying

coordinators to encourage anti-bullying work in schools. In my authority, the

coordinator also provided a point of referral for cases concerning bullying that remained

unresolved despite internal school anti-bullying policies and practice. A successful

routine procedure was developed for use, mainly in primary schools. We found that

when using a support group of children, the coordinator could expect to bring the large

majority of referrals, over 90%, to a successful conclusion within a month i.e. the pupil

was happy in school and child, parent and teachers were satisfied the bullying had

stopped. One of the roles of the anti-bullying coordinator was to help disseminate good

practice in schools, so with this in mind, a member of school staff usually observed the

intervention. This also helped to build a trusting relationship between the coordinator

and the school. Once they had seen it demonstrated, several teachers and teaching assistants were confident enough to use this strategy successfully for other pupils.

The most common source of referral was from a parent phoning the local authority for support. Typically, they had already talked to the appropriate teacher and head of the school but they believed their child was still being bullied. Parents in this situation were pleased to have someone else to intervene on their behalf. Usually a home visit to the parent was arranged for the next day, followed immediately by a visit to the school. Treating referrals in this way sent out a clear message to parents and schools - the concern was being taken seriously and given urgent attention.

Parents would often be exasperated because they believed, justifiably or not, that the school was not dealing with the problem effectively. Frustrated and unsure what to do for the best, they may have been considering transferring the child to another school. The parents needed primarily to be heard and reassured. Initially they may have been seeking punishment for the 'bullies' because punishment is the only action they knew of that might work, even though it may have been tried in the past and failed. However, what they wanted was effectiveness rather than retribution, so they were usually more than ready to accept an alternative strategy. It was also reassuring for them to know they would be kept informed throughout the intervention, something that schools had sometimes neglected to do.

The Support Group Approach

Interview the 'victim'

When I saw the child in school I would try to begin the conversation with non-problem talk. I may have started with a compliment about something they are wearing or what they were doing when they were brought from their class. The idea was to avoid giving the impression that I only saw them in terms of a problem. Then I would ask questions that I knew they would have no difficulty answering such as *What is your last name? How old are you? What is your class teacher's name?* A couple of minutes spent in this kind of preamble can pay dividends for the rest of the session.

To introduce the main part of the interview, I would usually say something like, *I have just been to see your mum - she's worried about you, isn't she?* It is well known that children feeling bullied often find it difficult to tell someone. It is easier for them to admit that someone else is worried. Then I would say, *Do you think she is right to be worried?* Invariably the answer was a nod or a quiet *yes*.

Just three essential questions need to be asked. It may be necessary to reassure children that any pupils they name are not going to get into trouble, otherwise they may be reluctant to answer.

Who are they finding difficult in school at the moment?

In primary school, usually two or more names are mentioned. There is no need to question how or why the child finds any of these pupils difficult.

Who else is around when things are difficult?

An essential ingredient in school bullying seems to be the presence of bystanders. That fact alone suggests that it is important to include them as part of the support group. Usually two or three names are mentioned.

Who are the child's friends, or whom would the child like to have as friends?

If bullying has been going on for an extended time, the child may have no friends left. It is not unusual for a child to give a name that has already been mentioned as a bystander or even a bully. Bully-victim conflict can often be the result of a friendship gone awry.

The support group is selected from these names. If possible, I would include all the pupils whom the child finds difficult plus a couple of bystanders and any friends or potential friends. I would be aiming at a group of about 5-7 pupils. I would tell the child that I am going to ask these pupils to help me by making him/her happier at school. I would end with the reassurance that things will get better, and that I wanted the child to tell me when I saw them next week what they have noticed improving.

Convene the support group and establish the aim

The selected pupils are brought to meet me, maybe a few looking a little sheepish or nervous on entering the room but I am smiling and welcoming – *Can you sit here? Have you enough room there? Can I see all your faces? Good! Thank you for*

coming, I'm pleased to meet you all. I need your help.

I explain to the group that my job is to help children if they are not happy in school. Today I am hoping that they will help me to help someone in their school. The reason they have been chosen is because I know they can all help. I have found this the easiest and most accurate way of explaining the selection and articulating the aim without being at all judgemental. I would not say that the child is being bullied in school, because this would probably make several members of the group defensive or even resentful. Although I do not presuppose that anyone in the group lacks empathy, I may raise their feelings of empathy for the child by asking if any of the group have ever been unhappy in school. There follows a very short discussion of occasions when they might have been unhappy and they may relate incidents of bullying - their knowledge of the situation is implicit. I may say: *It's not nice being unhappy in school is it? We don't want anyone to be unhappy in this school, do we? That's why I am asking you to help me make him/her happier.*

Ask for suggestions

I ask the group if they can suggest anything they could do to help make him/her happier over the next week? Some groups are full of ideas, some are not so forthcoming at first, but every suggestion is welcomed and complimented, unless it is clearly unacceptable. After the first couple of suggestions have been made and admired as appropriate, usually the rest of the group can think of something they can do.

Depending on the size of the group, there may be one or two at the end that cannot think of their own suggestion, so they may choose to help other members of the group. I also sometimes check that they think they can do it – *That's a good idea, would that be difficult for you to do?* They invariably say it would not be difficult, and this gives me the opportunity to compliment them on their kindness. I never give them 'jobs' to do; I never make them promise to do anything; I never ask them to be friends with the pupil they are supporting. I usually write down their names with the suggestions as we go along so that I can keep track of who has contributed which ideas, and this also acts as a means of valuing and validating each of their contributions.

Pass over responsibility and arrange to review

I end by briefly reviewing all their ideas and thanking them again. I assure the group that my expectations are positive: *Your suggestions make a very good plan and I am sure you will be successful in making him/her happier in school over the next week.* I then ask if they mind if I come back in a week's time for them to let me know how they are getting on. I do not want to leave it too long before checking the child is happier, but on the other hand I want to allow a bit of time for things to settle.

Review a week later

Firstly I meet with the 'victim'. This can be a very short meeting since everything is usually going fine and the pupil is happy in school. I congratulate the pupil - after all they too have had to make changes and it is important for them that I assume they have

a positive and instrumental role in the solution e.g. if they say they are playing with someone at lunchtimes, I will respond with: *That's excellent, I'm so glad you are playing with others now, well done!* I conclude by asking if everything is going to be fine now or would it be helpful if I called again?

Next I meet with the group. Again, this is usually not lengthy, but I do give enough time so that each member of the group has a chance to volunteer to tell me what they have done and I can compliment them individually as well as together as a group. I never refer back to the suggestions they made to check whether or not they have done them - that is not important. Sometimes one or two who previously were named as difficult are quiet during this session and I don't insist on contributions. It is as if they are standing back and just weighing up the situation. By the following week they usually have come on board and are eager to tell me what they have been doing to help. Even if they don't, the important outcome is that they have not bothered the child any further and they can be fully included in the compliments for the success of the group in any case.

Occasionally someone in the group may report that there has been some bullying from someone else in school. In these cases, the victim has usually not mentioned it. The group usually takes the initiative and sorts out anything minor like this themselves. They may simply tell someone: *We're not doing that any more!*

The future

I congratulate them as a group for a job well done. If I have any doubts at all, I ask if they would like to continue to help me for another week. They usually all agree and are often very enthusiastic - after all they have not been persuaded to do anything too onerous, or that they didn't choose to do. When I make arrangements to review again, I do not ask them to watch out and report back any problems – I don't want them to be searching for difficulties and I do not want them to think that I like to hear about problems. Most often, all going well, I review the situation twice - in a minority of cases the group may need to meet for up to 5 reviews. It is very rare for it to go beyond this. After each review I phone the parent to gather their views and let them know how things are going from my perspective.

When school staff are unaware of any further difficulties, the supported pupil says he/she is happy in school, the group is satisfied with how things are going and the parent is pleased that the bullying has stopped, the referral is closed.

Solution-focused features integrated into this approach include:

   • the solution is independent of the problem

This apparent anomaly is clearly demonstrated in practice. All the details of what has happened, when and for what reason, are left behind. Not only is it not necessary, when you apply this approach in practice it becomes clear that it is actually a hindrance to be raking over all the details. Although opportunity is given to pupils to say

whatever they feel they need to say, generally they are happy, maybe even relieved, to leave the past and associated bad feelings behind.

- the skeleton key

The fact that one strategy to address the whole range of situations where bullying may have been taking place is not a limitation but a strength of the approach. De Shazer used the term 'skeleton key' for strategies that unlock a whole range of problems, even though there are potentially limitless differences between individual referrals.

- it's fast!

Solution-focused practice is often described as a 'miracle' or 'magic' solution. The speed of change is a major factor in this. Using the support group approach, we have found that in over 80% of referrals the problem is solved immediately. The vast majority of cases are solved within a month. This is an amazing outcome given the general expectations for bringing about behaviour change in schools, traditionally thought to be slow and painstaking.

- reliance on the qualities and strengths of the participants

Observers often assume that I will offering advice during the session, and are surprised that it doesn't happen. The precise opposite is the case - I am asking the pupils what is the best course of action. Moreover, I am validating their ideas and trusting that they will be right. They are given full responsibility on the assumption that they know the situation best, so are in the best position to respond effectively. The power of finding their strengths and competencies and complimenting them is utilized whenever possible. Whenever a pupil makes a suggestion their ideas are immediately validated by warm

appreciation. In this way the solution is self-reinforcing rather than imposed and therefore more likely to last.

Longer term results

In every case we dealt with, other methods had previously been tried in the school. However, when the strategies already being used no longer work, any sympathy afforded to the 'victim' tends to erode and the blame begins to shift. They start to be thought of as in some way 'provocative' or the parent to be 'overprotective'. The most common strategy used in schools is punishment, e.g. the bullies are reprimanded, kept in for several break-times or parents informed. This may have been tried a few times. Now clearly these strategies do sometimes work, but at other times they do not have longer-term success.

Although unfortunately I cannot say that I have never had someone re-referred for bullying - it is relatively rare. I have also had the advantage of looking at the records of a school that decided to continue implementing this approach via a member of their own staff. The impressive records she kept showed that in approximately one year of over 50 children being supported by groups, only two were re-referrals.

Case Study

Gary's mother telephoned to ask what could be done about her child being bullied at school. She was obviously distressed on the phone as she spoke. I arranged to meet

both mum and Gary at home the following afternoon.

Gary was ten years old and attended the local primary school. His mum explained that he had started school with speech difficulties, and although he had been making progress, he was still behind for his age in reading. He was also physically small for his age and had unexplained rashes on his hands. Mum was anxious to explain that she did not have the money to buy Gary expensive fashionable clothes, especially sports shoes, but she always made sure that he was clean and tidy for school. Both mum and Gary became distressed. Gary was particularly distraught when I was told about his bedwetting. Apparently mum had tried to reason with the mother of one of the 'bullies' and had mentioned it. As a result the boys at school had found out and taunted him about it. The bullying had become worse and had started to happen outside school time in the street.

I outlined the support group approach but Gary was quite adamant that he did not want to return to the same school. Once I had the names of possible members of a support group, I suggested I check out what was happening at the school and return later.

When I visited the school I talked firstly to the head teacher who said that the family had given the school problems. The younger sister was very disruptive in class and the father was aggressive, having to be escorted off the premises on one occasion. They were aware that Gary had been the subject of some taunting but were also aware that he

was 'no angel' himself. They did try to deal with incidents as they happened.

I suggested the support group approach would be an appropriate way forward since no-one would be punished, possibly unfairly. The school would be seen to be taking action, the children involved would enjoy doing it and this was after all the most effective approach that we know of.

The children were called out of class. The group was aware that Gary was not happy in school, but we did not pursue any reasons why this might be. A couple of the group said that they had been unhappy in school when they had been called names in the past. When I asked if they had any suggestions for how to make him happier they were quite ready to come up with their own ideas. They concentrated on playtime and lunch-time. One suggested he would sit with Gary in the dining hall. Another said he would watch for Gary at playtime to make sure he was not alone. Another girl said she would talk to him. After each suggestion I reassured the pupil that what they said was a good idea and praised them individually in various ways e.g. *That's a good idea! How did you manage to think of that? Have you done kind things like that before?* Once I had suggestions from all of them, I thanked them, wished them luck and arranged to see them in a week's time to see how they were getting on.

It was difficult to persuade Gary to return to school. In the end it was arranged that his mum would take him to school and only leave him when the whistle had gone in the

yard. She would pick him up at lunchtime too. I said I would visit him in school in two days time. I checked with mum the following day that Gary had indeed returned to school. Mum sounded very worried on the phone about what he might be suffering at school, and what he might say at lunchtime. Mum warned me that if Gary had been bullied that morning she did not feel able to insist on him going back in the afternoon.

Two days later I saw him briefly in school. When he came in the room to see me he smiled and said tearfully, *I never knew I had so many friends!* When I went back a week later he said things were even better because, *they weren't so fussy any more - it was just normal.*

After seeing Gary I met with the group and invited them to tell me if they had managed to help and if so, how? They told me, for example, how they had deliberately included him in games in the yard. After each report of how they had helped I complimented them on how they had done it, e.g. the sensitive and careful way they had shown support. I asked them if they thought he was happier and how did they know that? They said they knew he was better now because he was smiling and talking more and laughing. They were congratulated on their wonderful plan and I asked if they would help me for another week. They were all very keen to continue.

I phoned mum to ask how she felt things were going and she reported that Gary was a different lad, enjoying school again. She said Gary had even insisted that he be allowed

to stay at school for lunch.

The following week everything was settled and fine. I took a photograph of the group and Gary together - as I say, I like to have photographs of the best groups! I also arranged for the teacher to make sure they all received an appropriate school reward for their achievement. About a year later I was asked to help with another case in the same school, using the same approach. The teacher watched again and then continued to use support groups herself, entirely successfully.

The support group approach to bullying is solution-focused, readily accessible to teachers, enjoyed by the pupils and can be used tomorrow if necessary with the highest degree of confidence. No other strategy has been demonstrated to be so successful in responding to incidents of bullying in primary schools.

(This article is adapted from: Sue Young (2001) "Solution-focused anti-bullying" in *Solutions in Schools*, Eds. Y Ajmal & I Rees, BT Press)

Sue Young (2010) *Solution-Focused Schools: Anti-bullying and beyond*, BT Press, contains description of solution-focused approaches that can be useful in teacher training and working with whole classes as well as responding to incidents of bullying. Available on Amazon.