

School bullying during a pandemic

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The problem

School bullying involves the repeated intent to harm a child or young person, either directly or indirectly. Individuals who bully may participate in anti-social behaviour outside school, may be at increased risk of exclusion and therefore vulnerable to being involved in crime, or their bullying behaviour may be a response to their own victimisation. Children and young people who are victims of school bullying are the focus of behaviour which may be categorised as a criminal offence in other contexts, victims may be absent from school as a coping mechanism and may suffer severe mental health responses.

What we know about school bullying and how we know it

The most recent annual UK bullying survey found that 22% of young people were bullied between 2018-2019 (Ditch the Label, 2019), with 15% of those young people being bullied several times a week. This involved verbal bullying, physical assault or cyber-bullying; sometimes all three. Similar statistics were reported in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) in 2018 and it is estimated that one in five school children are affected by school bullying internationally (Ttofi and Farrington, 2012). Bullying can lead to high levels of anxiety and depression among those who are bullied and, tragically, to suicide. Whilst for victims of bullying, the lockdown may have provided temporary relief from unrelenting victimisation at school, for some, bullying will have continued online.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Coughing assault** – There are reports of Coronavirus coughing assaults during lockdown. This may now be used in incidents of school bullying and can have consequences for perpetrators since it may involve the police, as well as having possible life-threatening consequences for the victim, particularly if the victim has an underlying health condition.
- **Online bullying** – Bullying will have continued online during the lockdown for some children and young people and there is anecdotal evidence that levels of online bullying may have been higher than normal, because more time has been spent online. Furthermore, the usual school-based support has not been so readily available. There may therefore be an increase in mental health referrals by some victims during the school return period.
- **Re-establishment of friendship groups** – With the relaxation of lockdown, children and young people are starting to re-establish physical contact with friends and this will continue during the return to school period. This will inevitably be a mixed experience, with some groups re-establishing networks easily and new groups developing. After a break from school, a settling in period is normal; however, we are in unprecedented times. Some individuals will be excluded and some will want to re-establish their dominance over their peers; they may wish to regain control after feeling powerless during lockdown, and this may result in conflict. This may be a particular issue for Year 9 in secondary schools, where bullying is often more prevalent than in other school year groups.
- **Location of bullying** – School bullying is usually unseen by school staff, although it is often seen by other pupils (bystanders). Staff will be more visible during the school return period, because of the need to direct the flow of pupils around school buildings to ensure that a social distance is kept between individuals, and this may reduce the incidence of bullying in some spaces. However, it is possible that this will lead to a concentration of physical bullying in spaces where there is no formal surveillance, such as on school buses and the perimeters of school grounds.

- **Bullying by victims of domestic abuse** – The increased vulnerability of domestic abuse victims has been widely publicised during the lockdown, as well as the vulnerability of children and young people to online child sexual exploitation. School bullying can sometimes be a response to such victimisation in other places or online and may increase in this prolonged period of school return.

Some ideas in response

- **Coughing assault** – Teachers may want to emphasise that Covid-19 coughing assault is unacceptable, including clear signage. Schools would be advised to plan in advance how they will approach such incidents and work with local police in dealing with it, for example when there are repeat offences. Schools may welcome input from local police representatives as they plan for whole school return in September.
- **Online bullying** – Schools should be prepared for an increase in reports of online bullying which have occurred during lockdown, with particular planning around mental health support provision.
- **Re-establishment of friendship groups** – It will be important for the return to school to help pupils re-establish friendship groups in a pro-social way, avoiding conflict. This will be particularly so for secondary schools and Year 8/9 groups. A focus on helping pupils engage with one another in an emotionally intelligent way is important at this time and there are organisations in the UK which deliver excellent interventions in schools using this approach. Publicising whole-school behaviour policies at the outset will be helpful.
- **Location of bullying** – Schools should restate their anti-bullying policies, particularly in schools where there is a specific bullying problem, and ensure that children and young people know the procedure for reporting incidents. If schools do not currently have a clear reporting and recording system, this is a good time to establish one. Giving thought to where physical bullying might concentrate might help to prevent victimisation in these spaces. Local police representatives may be able to advise. Many schools have sent information about online bullying to pupils and parents/carers during lockdown; they should consider re-sending this information in anticipation of a possible surge in bullying in other locations. Local authorities should attend to staff shortages on school buses, to ensure that this space is protected for the safety of the bus drivers and the children and young people.
- **Bullying by victims of domestic abuse** – Schools and the police will need to plan for an increase in reports of abuse at home and online. An increase in the intensity of bullying by an individual with previous bullying history may be a response to victimisation elsewhere in their life and the same may be the case for new perpetrators with no history of bullying behaviour.

Relevant resources :

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *Safe to Learn: Embedding Anti-Bullying Work in Schools*.

Available here: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8125/7/SAFE%20TO%20LEARN_Redacted.pdf

Department for Education (2018) *Bullying in England, April 2013 to March 2018: Analysis on 10 to 15 year olds from the Crime Survey of England and Wales*. Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bullying-in-england-april-2013-to-march-2018>

Department for Education (2018) *Approaches to Preventing and Tackling Bullying: Case Studies*. Available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/approaches-to-preventing-and-tackling-bullying>

Smith, P. (2019) *Focus on Bullying 2019*. Anti-Bullying Alliance. Available here: https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/FOCUS_2019%20FINAL.pdf

The Vodden Report (2019) *An Agenda for Change*. Available here: <https://voddenreport.com/publications/>

Whole school approaches to managing poor behaviour. Information available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/whole-school-approach-managing-poor-behaviour>

Whole school approaches to encouraging good behaviour. Information available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/using-rewards-encouraging-good-behaviour>

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>