

Opening the school gates:

Bullying is a community issue

Glasgow, 23rd April 2005
Organised by Children in
Scotland.

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This report was written by an attending
representative of SACP and is not an official
minute of the event



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Report prepared by Margaret Easton on behalf of SACP.

Andrew Mellor, manager of the Anti-Bullying Network, who also made one of the presentations, chaired the conference. Other speakers were Brendan Byrne, an experienced counsellor and former teacher from Ireland, and Lindsay Graham, at the time working for Highland Council as development officer for Health Promoting Schools.

Although the day sought to focus on the community aspect of bullying, much of the time was devoted to school-based situations and possible solutions. Delegates had the opportunity to take part in whole-group discussion as well as working in smaller groups, which had been organised so that there was a breadth of experience within each group.

The speakers highlighted the long-lasting consequences of bullying, the difficulties met when dealing with both bully and bullied and the strategies that have been found useful by individuals and communities (mainly school).

The long-term consequences of bullying were illustrated by recorded experiences of adults whose self-esteem and confidence had taken years to recover even partially from the effects of bullying. Attention was also drawn to the problem of bullying in the workplace by adults who may have graduated to more developed bullying techniques.

Brendan Byrne spoke of the difficulty of identifying true bullying, as opposed to the occasional incidences of name calling which may be viewed as a normal part of life. These may be perceived as bullying by young people or adults lacking in self-esteem. As such, even if not bullying according to Byrne's definition, they should not be ignored and support should be offered to the person feeling bullied.

Byrne's definition of bullying behaviour involves much more persistent and deliberate attempts to make life miserable for the victim who may become a target as a result of appearance, timidity, or an over anxious attitude (often passed on by parents) which leads him/her to overreact. Crucially this type of behaviour will flourish in a situation where it appears to be tolerated and Byrne warned against, for example, sports and youth clubs encouraging an overly competitive approach which permits aggressive behaviour and language at training and during matches. He also encouraged organisations not to move the bullied person to another class/ group / department as a result of bullying thereby both stigmatising them and sending the message to others that the bully cannot be dealt with. Contrary to the stereotypical image of bullying, it has been found that 95% of bullying behaviour is non-physical and the wide availability of mobile phones and internet contact has encouraged this.

Anti-bullying Strategies

At an individual level, the person being bullied should be made to feel that they are not responsible and that the first step must be to talk to someone. Focus should be on enhancing the self-esteem of the person being bullied by developing talents, building the ability to deal with each moment as it comes instead of speculating on what might happen and encouraging continued contact with friends – barriers put up to deter bullies can also

get in the way of friendship. The bully should be in no doubt that bullying is unacceptable and should be helped to develop empathy with others, be given the opportunity to explore through counselling why it is they bully and afforded alternative ways of behaving, perhaps by being given additional responsibilities. On no account should the bullying behaviour be rewarded with increased power or status. Byrne advocates the strongest possible sanctions against the bully who has been given the opportunity to alter their behaviour but who has not.

What are the implications of this for communities?

Both Byrne and Graham stressed the importance of using all available resources within a community and working together to create a safe community for all. They gave examples of ways in which school communities have dealt with bullying. The schools with which they have been most closely involved have been at pains to involve as wide a cross-section of the community as was necessary to enable them to deal effectively with the problem. All school staff, particularly non-teaching staff, were involved in monitoring behaviour. Bus companies were actively involved in monitoring and reporting bullying behaviour. In one case the bus company offered significant concessions on the cost of bus transport to school pupils willing to monitor the conduct of pupils on school buses. Local businesses were encouraged to pass on information about incidences of bullying observed before and after school and during lunch breaks.

Andrew Mellor gave an overview of the problem from the viewpoint of the Anti-Bullying Network. He stressed the necessity for organisations to admit that bullying can exist within their pupils/employees, that it is difficult to deal with, and to recognise that there is a relationship between the ethos of the organisation and the amount of bullying which occurs within it. Where it seems permissible to treat others with a lack of respect, bullying can more readily occur.

He repeated the request that an inter-agency approach be developed to deal with the problem effectively, adding that this works best when there is stability in the personnel involved and when one agency assumes a co-ordinating role.

Further information can be accessed at the following websites:

Anti-Bullying Network website – www.antibullying.net

Further information about Dr. Brendan Byrne –
www.antibullying.net/knowledge/alltheauthors.htm

Further details of the project described by Lindsay Graham –
www.ethosnet.co.uk/outline/LindsayGraham.pdf