

## **NSPCC Policy Summary Sexual Bullying in Education Settings**

### **Objective**

To promote best practice employed by educational settings to prevent and respond to incidences of sexual bullying.

To uphold every child's right to protection from all forms of violence and exploitation and to a safe education, and to increase recognition that sexual bullying prevents the full enjoyment of these rights.

### **Definition<sup>1</sup>**

Any bullying behaviour, whether physical or non-physical, that is based on a person's sexuality or gender. It is when sexuality or gender is used as a weapon by boys or girls towards other boys or girls – although it is more commonly directed at girls. It can be carried out to a person's face, behind their back or through the use of technology.

For example:

- Teasing or putting someone down because of:
  - their sex life (e.g. because they haven't had sex or if they've had sex with a number of people)
  - their sexuality (e.g. making fun of someone for being homosexual)
  - their body (e.g. the size of their breasts, bottom or muscles)
- Using words that refer to someone's sexuality in a derogatory way (like calling something 'gay' to mean that it is not very good)
- Using sexual words to put someone down (like calling someone 'slut' or 'bitch')
- Making threats or jokes about serious and frightening subjects like rape
- Spreading rumours about someone's sexuality and sex life – including graffiti, texts and msn.
- Touching parts of someone's body that they don't want to be touched
- Putting pressure on someone to act in a sexual way.

The NSPCC has developed a 10-point guide to support education settings in preventing and responding to sexual bullying. This will be published on the NSPCC's INFORM website on October 2 2009.

### **Consequences**

Research has shown that sexual bullying can have a negative impact on the emotional well-being of the children and young people affected, including low self-esteem and confidence, poor body image, depression and anxiety. In some cases, sexual bullying can be linked to poorer educational outcomes and increased truancy rates for the young people involved.<sup>2</sup> In Northern

---

<sup>1</sup> The NSPCC has adapted this definition from the WomanKind Worldwide definition of sexual bullying.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan, N (2003) 'Girls, Bullying and School Transfer' in Sunnari, V; Kangasvuo, J and Heikkinen, M *Educational Gendered and Sexualised Violence in educational environments*

Ireland the report “Same Sex Attraction, Homophobic Bullying and the Mental Health of Young People in Northern Ireland” explored these issues.<sup>3</sup>

## Children’s rights

Children have a right to be safe from abusive and exploitative behaviour, and a right to a fulfilling education, and schools and other settings have a responsibility to protect them from such behaviour. Sexual bullying can prevent the full enjoyment of these rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These include:

- Article 19 States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

## UK legislation and guidance

Policy and legislation on bullying is different in each of the countries of the UK.

### England

In England, Section 61 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 introduced a legal requirement for schools to produce an anti-bullying policy (as part of a pupil discipline policy) from 1 September 1999. Additionally, Section 175 of the Education Act 2002 required schools and local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Subsequent guidance set out that safeguarding the welfare of children “encompasses issues such as pupil health and safety and bullying”<sup>4</sup>

The UK government guidance *Safe to Learn* specifies that the Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires headteachers to determine measures on behaviour and discipline that form the school’s behaviour policy. It suggests that the measures should be taken with a view to “encouraging good behaviour and respect for others on the part of pupils and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils.”<sup>5</sup>

---

Oulo: University of Oulo Press. Duffy, J; Wareham, S and Walsh, M (2004) ‘Psychological Consequences for High School Students of Having Been Sexually Harassed’ in *Sex Roles*, Vol. 50, Nos. 11/12, June. Gruber, J and Fineran, S (2008) ‘Comparing the Impact of Bullying and Sexual Harassment Victimization on the Mental and Physical Health of Adolescents’ in *Sex Roles* Vol. 59 (1–13)

<sup>3</sup> McNamee, H Llyod, Katrina Schubotz, D “Same Sex Attraction, Homophobic Bullying and Mental Health of Young People in NI”, The Rainbow Project, UK ARK, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen’s University, Belfast, UK.

<sup>4</sup> DfES (2007) *Safeguarding children and safer recruitment in education* London: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>5</sup> DCSF (2007) *Safe to learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families

The Department for Children, Schools and Families is drafting new guidance to assist schools in identifying and tackling sexist, sexual and transphobic<sup>6</sup> bullying, which is due to be published in late 2009.

### Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 introduced a legal duty for schools to have an anti-bullying policy in place and to consult with pupils and parents in its development. The Order imposes a similar duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children on school governors.

The NSPCC in Northern Ireland recently conducted a survey in partnership with the four Area Child Protection Committees.<sup>7</sup> Parents and other adults were asked about bullying and the findings confirmed that while bullying is not classified as a form of abuse for the purposes of child protection in Northern Ireland, it is consistently the most prevalent form of harm experienced by children. A quarter of those surveyed who had children aged 12 to 17 years said their child had been bullied in the last twelve months. One in six had been verbally bullied, while one in ten mentioned physical or social bullying. Very few, just three per cent, said they were aware their child had been bullied using electronic means.

In 2007 a research paper for the Department of Education recommended that the legislation in Northern Ireland should be reviewed to determine whether the issues of “Child Protection” and “Bullying Prevention” need to be more closely aligned. In particular, the report recommended that consideration be given “to the classification of bullying as a form of ‘significant harm’ in line with regulations and guidance associated with pastoral care.”<sup>8</sup>

### Scotland

There is no statutory duty in Scotland for schools to have an anti-bullying policy, although schools are officially expected to have one in place. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) inspects schools both on policy content and anti-bullying practice within schools.

### Wales

All schools in Wales have to have a policy that prevents all forms of bullying behaviour. To support the development of these policies the Welsh Assembly Government published their anti-bullying guidance called *Respecting Others*, which provides information on how to develop a whole school approach to challenging bullying. The Welsh Assembly Government has also established

---

<sup>6</sup> DSCF guidance *Safe from Bullying: guidance for local authorities and other strategic leaders on reducing bullying in the community* (2009) defines transphobic bullying as ‘bullying because someone is, or is thought to be, transgender.’

<sup>7</sup> “Attitudes to Child Protection in Northern Ireland”, (forthcoming publication) A report of a survey conducted on behalf of the NSPCC and the 4 ACPCs

<sup>8</sup> Livesy, G McAleavy, G Donegan, G Duffy, J O’Hagan, C Adamson, G White, E “Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland”, Department of Education, Research Paper no 46, 2007.

an anti-bullying network that shares good practice and facilitates the development of anti-bullying week in Wales.

### **School responses to incidents of sexual bullying**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that schools often do not recognise sexual bullying as a distinct form of bullying. This suggests a clear gap in research evidence. While the prevalence of bullying in schools has been studied extensively, little attention has been paid to undertaking national research which sets out the prevalence of sexual bullying, nor how schools respond to it.

However, practice evidence gathered from NSPCC practitioners providing child protection and safeguarding advice to schools suggests that when schools do identify sexual bullying as an issue, they very often do not know how to tackle it appropriately.<sup>9</sup>

Although schools are not solely responsible for tackling sexual bullying, school staff need to understand the severe negative impact that this type of bullying can have on children and young people.

### **Calls to ChildLine about sexual bullying**

Calls to ChildLine show that sexual bullying can be experienced by children and young people in a variety of ways, such as name-calling, inappropriate comments, threats and harassment.

Sexual bullying can also involve receiving obscene messages and threats by internet and mobile phone. This type of bullying is becoming more prevalent as the use of technology increases. A UK study of more than 11,000 secondary school pupils from 2002 to 2005, asking them how often they had received any nasty or threatening text messages or e-mails, showed an increase year on year.<sup>10</sup>

Between April 2007 and March 2008, ChildLine counselled a total of 176,185 children. Of these, 32,562 children spoke about bullying as a main concern and 211 of these talked about sexual bullying. Of these callers 99 were female and 112 were male.

In the most recent year, from April 2008 to March 2009, ChildLine counselled a total of 156,729 children. Of these, 26,134 children spoke about bullying as a main concern and 300 of these talked about sexual bullying.

Children and young people calling ChildLine about being sexually bullied called about different types of sexual bullying. Examples included:

---

<sup>9</sup> Schubotz et al (2006) "The views and experiences of children and young people in relation to the development and review of bullying policies in schools". Commissioned by NICCY. Sept 2005-June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Noret, N and Rivers, I (2006) *The prevalence of bullying by text message or email: Results of a four-year study* Poster presented at British Psychological Society Annual Conference, Cardiff

- A young teenage girl called because she was stressed about the way a boy acts towards her. He says very inappropriate sexual things to her and even though the teachers and her parents are all aware of this, his behaviour continues. It's really affecting her.
- A teenage girl called to say she is teased by one boy in particular who tries to touch her under her skirt. He has also followed her and in class tries to touch her and pull up her skirt.
- A young caller said she was being bullied by the same people who bully her friend. She had her trousers pulled down and has been subjected to sexual comments.
- A female caller said she felt really pleased that she was going to move as boys nearby have been whistling to her and then they try to pull her tops down. She wanted to speak about how one tried to hit her little sister.
- A female teenager said a boy was saying another boy wanted to have sex with her and she wanted the rumours to stop.
- A female caller being called a 'cow' and a 'prostitute'; children at school also try to touch her. They have spread a rumour that she slept with somebody.
- A teenage boy who had been bullied at school for the past two weeks. He had his pants pulled down and silly remarks were made. He may talk to the PE teacher whom he gets on with.

Some young people who called ChildLine claimed the school had taken disciplinary measures, and in one case the school had called in the young person's parents for a meeting. In other cases, callers claimed that their teachers did not believe them when they reported the bullying and some young people said that the schools failed to act after the bullying had been reported.

## **Recommendations**

### **A safe school environment**

The most effective anti-bullying initiatives are those that form part of a whole school strategy. Alongside devising and implementing anti-bullying policies, all members of the school community, including teachers, support staff, pupils, parents and governors, should be involved in creating and maintaining a safe environment. This requires a culture of vigilance and a clear understanding by everyone of acceptable behaviour. It also requires members of the school community to uphold standards of behaviour as set out in the anti-bullying policy, and to prevent and respond swiftly to all forms of bullying. Furthermore, sexual bullying should be clearly identified within anti-bullying policies as an area for preventative work and action where it is seen or reported.

### **Anonymous questionnaires: a useful tool for all schools**

We recommend the use of regular anonymous questionnaires to monitor the effectiveness of the school's anti-bullying policy, and to understand the time, place and nature of any bullying that is occurring. They should be undertaken at least once a year and should be completed by all pupils. Mapping the problem in this way can highlight the extent of the problems to staff members, and also conveys ownership of anti-bullying strategies to the children and young people. Survey outcomes should inform policy and practice development in consultation with teachers, pupils and parents/carers.

### **Adequate and accessible provision of information about ChildLine and independent schools counsellors**

ChildLine offers children and young people a confidential space for talking about their problems, including bullying. Posters showing ChildLine's number, 0800 1111, and the ChildLine online support service [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk) should be on prominent display in educational settings used by children and young people.

Independent school counselling services should be provided throughout the UK to give children and young people access to an adult who can help them if they are experiencing or witnessing bullying. Through such services, counsellors can support children to develop the tools needed to improve their situation and/or help them to find further help if this is needed. They can also help to build resilience and self-esteem.

Although physically located in schools, face-to-face counselling services should be provided independently to ensure that the child's emotional and psychological problems and difficulties are responded to separately from their educational development. Providing a service which is independent of teaching staff also provides young people with a better level of confidentiality.

The opportunity to use counselling services in school must be made available to all children. Children who have specific communication needs or learning disabilities should be enabled to communicate through signing and communication techniques. Peer support and advice services, such as ChildLine's CHIPS (ChildLine in Partnerships) service, are also important. Peer support projects enable older children to support younger children who are experiencing bullying or other difficulties and all schools should consider introducing these.

### **Initial teacher training and continuing professional development**

It is good practice for every school to review its anti-bullying policy every two years<sup>11</sup> and this should include a review of the training needs of staff. Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses should include how to prevent and address sexual and other forms of bullying and this should be incorporated into continuous professional development programmes.

In particular, staff should receive training to help recognise the signs that may indicate that sexual bullying has progressed into sexually harmful behaviour, sexual assault, exploitation or abuse. In such instances, they will need to

---

<sup>11</sup> DCSF (2007) *Safe to learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families

work with the school's nominated child protection lead (the Designated Teacher in Northern Ireland) as a referral to children's services and/or the police may be required.

## **Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE)**

### *England*

We welcome the Government's proposal that personal, social health and economic education (PSHE) is to be made a statutory subject in England for 5–16-year-olds. Evidence shows that PSHE is an important intervention for preventing bullying.<sup>12</sup> PSHE lessons and activities as well as other curriculum subjects should be used to raise awareness about the nature of sexual bullying and its effects to encourage pupils to think of possible solutions to the problem that are relevant to their own experiences. We strongly recommend that guidance on PSHE teaching should require sexual bullying to be covered within the curriculum.

PSHE lessons can also be used to teach children about their broader rights, as outlined through the UNCRC. In addition, PSHE can help to develop children's self-esteem, self-confidence and assertiveness. It should address attitudes to relationships and issues of violence, power, coercion and consent within those relationships, recognising that bullying, aggression and violence are wrong. PSHE lessons should also focus on what makes for positive human relationships, and help children understand and value human difference and diversity.

### *Northern Ireland*

Dealing with all forms of bullying is something that should be addressed through the Personal Development component of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Helping children to keep themselves safe from all forms of harm as well as the providing advice and information on where to seek help, for example from ChildLine, should be a key outcome for the Promoting Health and Emotional Well Being programme being developed by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland.

## **Anti-bullying coordinators**

### *Wales*

Local or regional anti-bullying coordinators should be established across Wales to provide support and advice to schools and other agencies on issues relating to bullying, including disseminating best practice and organising local training events. These roles would help to ensure that Welsh Assembly Government guidance is reflected in practice and that professionals have the support they need to put in place successful interventions.

## **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The majority of children and young people in England have no knowledge or understanding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The forty-ninth session of the committee on the rights of the child stated that, "The Committee is concerned that there is no systematic

---

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Children's Commissioner (2005) *Journeys: children and young people talk about bullying*. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.

awareness-raising about the Convention and that the level of knowledge about it among children, parents or professional working with children is low. Furthermore, the Committee regrets that the Convention is not part of the curriculum in schools.”<sup>13</sup>

Children and young people should be taught about the UNCRC. It is vital that there should be a clear understanding within the whole school community of the rights of the child, particularly with respect to diversity – not only in developing anti-bullying policies and practice but also in creating a school ethos built on tolerance and respect. For example, in Wales, the new Personal and social education framework for 7 to 19-year-olds in Wales for the first time includes explicitly that children and young people should be taught about the UN Convention.

Training for professionals on the UNCRC will help school staff to develop a firm understanding of the Convention’s values and principles, and how these should underpin and provide an important framework for anti-bullying work. All school staff, including school governors, should have an understanding of the Convention.

---

***Related NSPCC policy summaries***

- Children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviour
- Independent School-based Counselling and Peer Support

**Date last reviewed:** September 2009  
**Contact:** Kate Fitch  
Email: [kfitch@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:kfitch@nspcc.org.uk)  
Tel: 0207 825 1301

---

<sup>13</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008) *Forty-ninth session Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under Article 44 of the Convention. Concluding observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* Geneva: United Nations