

STEPS TO COUNTER BULLYING: A SUMMARY OF METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

© Erika SZIRMAI
(Kölcsey Ferenc Reformed Teacher Training College, Debrecen,
Hungary)

szirmai@kfrtkf.hu

Over the last three decades school bullying has been a more and more widely researched phenomenon in several European countries, as well as overseas in Canada, the United States and also in Australia.

Everyday experience and research results both indicated a strong need for prevention and intervention, which soon started, on different levels. The procedures include those aiming at the participants themselves and those aiming at the wider community, steps to intervene when bullying happens and steps to prevent bullying from happening. Some procedures are organized around one specific idea, some combine different techniques. The person responsible for the steps can be a peer or an adult, one individual or teams. The difference in them reflects different interpretations of bullying itself, considering it as an act of individual responsibility or that of some malfunction of a whole community - with the latter being more widely accepted. This summary introduces the steps suggested for reducing bullying, with special respect to those less known in the Hungarian context. The steps include the „Whole school approach”, befriending, Circle time, Circle of friends, mediation, peer support approaches like „No Blame”, the Method of Shared Concern, School Tribunal / Bully Courts, restorative practice, assertiveness building, bystander training, School Watch and also mentions procedures aimed at school staff like training school personnel, enhancing playground supervision, reorganizing activities or at improving the physical environment of the schools by rebuilding places where children are not attended. These procedures are carried out under different conditions and in different contexts, which makes it difficult to compare them. Data about their efficiency is rather scarce, and most often do not stand the test of objectivity and reliability. An example of where this is done and several of the above procedures are evaluated and compared is the anti-bullying programme of the British Ministry of Education, the results of which are also introduced.

Keywords: school bullying, prevention, intervention

Bullying, an act of aggression, has been in the centre of both public and scholarly attention in several countries for decades. Although data about its prevalence show great differences across countries and cultures there seems

to be consensus about the fact that it is a serious problem and deserves attention – both from the public and from professionals.

The definition of bullying includes the element of intentionality to cause harm and an imbalance of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Olweus, 2001) – although for some researchers repeatedness is not a necessary condition. Although research has been going on for long and has been aimed at different directions to try to find causes for these acts, it has been unsuccessful to indicate particular conditions that always lead to these acts. It is an extremely complex interplay of reasons that triggers an act of bullying, which complexity seems to be the main cause of difficulties in finding the right measures to counter it. This may give a reason for why there have been so many attempts and so many different approaches – some of which are introduced below.

The methods presented below largely differ in several aspects. Some are simpler in focusing on one particular technique, others include several different ones. The methods can be classified as to what they aim at: they can be aimed at an individual or can be community focused. They can also be classified as interventive – or sometimes curative –, those focusing on the event right after or when it happens, and preventive methods, those trying to avoid bullying events to happen by building up a healthy community.

Table 1 summarizes some aspects of the methods discussed (based on the 2002 evaluation of the anti-bullying pack used in schools in Great-Britain). Though most of them have multiple foci, their primary focus is indicated below.

Table 1.

approaches	Starting at ...	Focus				
		Bully / bullies	Victim(s)	peers	School environment	School ethos
Video films, literature	school			X		
Bullying in the curriculum	school	X	X	X		
Dram and role play	school			X		
Circle time	5			X		
Circle of friends	5		X			
Befriending	9		X			
Mediation	9	X	X			
No Blame Approach	9	X	X	X		
Method of Shared C.	9	X	X			
School tribunals / Bully C.	n.i.*	X	X			
Restorative practice	n.i.	X	X			
Cooperative group work	5			X		X
Assertiveness-training groups	Primary and secondary		X	X		
Bystander training	n.i.			X		
School watch	9					X
Whole school policy	school	X	X	X		X
Playground policy	n.i.				X	
Training playground supervisors	n.i.				X	
Rearranging and improving playgrounds	n.i.				X	

* not indicated - Based on Smith & Samara, 2003

On introducing these approaches first approaches aiming at the personal - social aspect are presented. These include methods that focus on the participants of the bullying act and are mostly interventive or curative in their approach. Others, having a wider focus, aim at the whole community and by trying to establish a healthy community aim at avoiding these problems from happening, thus are mostly preventive.

Approaches working on the topic of bullying

Most of the techniques presented here can be implemented more widely, depending on the materials used. They are included here because they can counter bullying by working against this phenomenon by making the community more aware of the problem and its different aspects. In fact they can be used both in a preventive way by raising awareness and also in a curative way, by using the pieces to help discuss events that happened and need intervention.

The most general way to tackle the issues is *discussions* based on video materials and literature. Materials on bullying are widely available in English-speaking countries, some developed for the reason (educational materials: *Bullying: Don't Suffer in Silence*; *Beat Bullying* – DfES (Department for Education and Skills – the British ministry of education), *Making the Difference* – ABA (Anti-Bullying Alliance), some on their own right (the film *Billy Elliot*, directed by Stephen Daldry (for further films on bullying see www.filmclub.org), a chapter of the children's novel *The Dreamer* by Ian McEwan, or *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding). These from the basis of discussions organized by teachers, educational psychologists, counsellors as a regular part of the curriculum or of special events, like anti-bullying days or weeks.

Drama and role play are also widely applied techniques in countering bullying. Pieces worked on can be of topics of bullying, but these events can also act as a medium of releasing tension for participants or of developing social skills.

Circle time is a method – widely used in British schools- which uses some time (20-30 minutes) daily or weekly to discuss topics of common interest or do storytelling and games. Participants sit in a circle –as the name suggests. Besides improving participants' conversation techniques (turn-taking, interrupting), it improves social skills, socialization, understanding own and others' behaviour, tolerance, problem-solving. In work about bullying principles for the community policies can be worked out and negotiated through discussing problems and experience.

Evaluations about anti-bullying techniques show that particular events of curricular work (discussing the topic of bullying) need to be complemented by consistent work and other steps (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Approaches aiming at children

The approaches discussed in the following part of this paper all work for those who have taken part in a bullying incident. The child needing help most often is the victim.

The methods described in this subgroup have children to help their peers. These children –as individuals or as a group – form a protective circle around the child victimized or at risk. By getting support the victim –who is often lonely and lacks friends – is given confidence.

Circle of Friends is a method widely used in psychology to treat individuals with relationship problems. The patient – in this case the child bullied and experiencing a personal crisis-, is helped by children whose friendship and mentoring helps the child overcome the problem. The facilitator finds the friends and asks them to help the person in need. They first discuss the case – with the victim not taking part - and then decide on how support can be provided. The groups meet once a week and spend about 15-30 minutes to discuss and evaluate events and problems of the week and suggest solutions. The method is based on the cooperation and support of the peers. In the case of successful cooperation the teacher / facilitator takes part only in starting the group, then work continues without adult intervention. The method has proved to be flexible and creative in forming positive relationships among peers.

Befriending is used mostly in social work in Great-Britain. This method pairs an individual living alone and isolated with a friend who acts as a supporting companion to them. Their cooperation is supervised. Ideally the relationship is mutually advantageous for both parties; they take commitments on both sides. In school bullying these children take responsibility over the victimized child; they spend time together in breaks and out of school. In some schools a corner of friendship is set up, where these groups or pairs can play together (Thompson et al., 2002:141). These methods are supported by research results proving that bullying is most successfully countered by friendships (Smith et al., 2004).

Children helping peers on adult guidance

The following methods are similar to the previous ones in children being the key participants, but differ from those in that these methods rely on adult expertise in a larger extent. The children who help should also be trained so that they could take part in the process.

Mediation uses negotiation between the bully and the victim through an impartial mediator to help them realize the problem and its solution, and also to achieve that both parties accept the solution and accept it as fair. The trained mediator (student or adult) leads the process in a structured way. First the problem and the key issues are defined, then both parties suggest a solution. They agree on the steps to take, then write them down and sign it. During the follow-up process results are evaluated.

The approach is generally successful, and improves both the school climate and the quality of peer relations. In Hungary these methods are used to avoid matters getting into court.

Peer Support Approaches

Although mediation can also be run by peers thus it is also a peer support approach, the following two approaches are the ones traditionally termed as peer support approaches. As the name shows it is children who facilitate solving the problem as peers, classmates, counsellors or supporters. Using peer support approaches in preventing bullying has been proved to be successful, especially with seventh and eighth graders and those with special needs (Cowie & Sharp, 1996). In Naylor and Cowie (1999) results were similar: those enjoying the support of peers had self-esteem and self-confidence strengthened.

No Blame

As the name of this approach –developed by Maines and Robinson - indicates, intervention is believed to achieve its aim not by prohibitions and punishment. Since those advocating this approach believe that bullying is fighting for dominance and status by hurting others, a long-term positive change in the bully's behaviour can be achieved by developing higher standards, unselfishness and empathy. To achieve this the teacher takes the following steps:

- interview the victim focusing on his/her feelings;
- talk to 6-8 participants about the victim's feelings using a picture or a poem. Blaming the bully and / or the victim and discussing the details should be avoided;
- share responsibilities: the teacher, emphasizing the responsibility of the group, asks the group for suggestions on how the victim can be helped.
- The group is given the decision. A date to discuss results is agreed on.
- In a week the group meet again and they discuss what has been achieved. This way the teacher can monitor the case and the participants.

The approach believes helping the victim to be the most important and does not blame the bully but tries to develop empathy towards the victim. A detailed discussion of the case is to be avoided since it would produce tension, and the ultimate goal is to find a solution and create peaceful conditions. It is strongly believed that a permanent change can be achieved only by raising emotional awareness and empathy, by developing social skills, and by avoiding punishment. The approach is not suitable for extreme pathological cases. Also it is often difficult for teachers not to use the traditional blaming attitude (Smith et al., 2007). Menesini et al. point out a positive change in attitudes and negative behaviours characterizing the group formerly: they succeeded in avoiding negative developments that happened in the control groups (Menesini et al., 2003).

The Method of Shared Concern

The method developed by Swedish psychologist Anatole Pikas emphasizes a basic difference by claiming bullying a group event in the sense that it is not one individual bullying a victim, but a group of bullies (possibly with one leader). The method is to be used for events when a strong group commits physical or mental aggression on a weaker individual. The aim is to break up the bullying group by talking to its individuals using frank, two-way communication. It must be achieved that bullies verbalize their shared concerns and worries and prepare a mutual conflict resolution negotiated in group discussions involving the victim (Pikas, 2002:310). Breaking up the group is not aimed at breaking up friendships but at changing their attitudes and behaviours towards the victim – and other potential victims.

A typical procedure includes the following steps:

- The teacher studies the case: possibly by asking witnesses or relying on his/her experience of the event and not by questioning the bully/bullies and the victim.
- In a conversation with the bully the teacher asks the bully (individually) and talks about his/her – teacher's- worries about the victim, asks the child what he/she knows about the case and how he/she thinks the case can be

improved. It is important that some solution be achieved. (All bullies participate in a similar discussion.)

- The teacher talks to the victim assuring him/her about the teacher's support, and examines the victim's role (the victim can be a provocative victim, challenging the bully), and tells the victim of the solutions and promises suggested by the bully/bullies.
- Following the meetings and discussions with the perpetrators the group discusses what has been achieved, and if the bullying has stopped, they prepare a meeting with the victim participating. It is important that the bully/bullies promise that they behave in a positive way towards the victim.
- If the teacher sees improvement, on the meeting with the bully/bullies and the victim they record – in writing also, if possible – how they will behave in the future (Pikas, 2002).

The approach is justified by the following (Rigby, 1998): Bullying done in a group decreases the individual responsibility of a bully and makes him/her insensitive towards the victim's harm or how serious the harm is. In general, however, as individuals they do not realize how wrong their behaviour was, nor can they feel the support of the group.

Since the teacher does not act as accusing or punishing authority but expresses care and sympathy, the bully's positive and responsible attitude is promoted.

Both these approaches put a strong emphasis on avoiding blaming and thus a possible aggravation of the situation. The method of *School tribunals / Bully Courts* approaches work against bullying from the other side: although they also employ children to restore order, it strongly differs from most of the other methods in its approach in its preference for punishment. The procedure is based on legal courts and aims at judging the bullying event and deciding the punishment, usually with the children setting up the court and agreeing on the verdict. It is a less favoured method as it puts the emphasis on retorting.

Restorative practice

These practices are known in the Hungarian context as well, suggested as alternative punishment in criminology. It aims at making the perpetrators aware of the harm done to the victim and makes it possible for him/her to offer individual compensation. During the practice participants of the case discuss it together and work out a strategy together to settle the case (Herczog 2008). In English-speaking countries - as a method in bullying intervention - community conferences, small group individual conferences and class-conferences are used, where different participants investigate the case in a shared discussion and mutually agree on how good relations can be achieved or restored. Problem-solving, apart from making the bully account for his/her deeds, should give support to the community harmed.

Procedures to improve the personality or the community. *Cooperative group work* is not specifically a way to counter bullying but is used as a general approach in education. It was however used as the central idea in the 1990 Sheffield experiment to counter bullying, claiming that children who cooperate successfully are less likely to harass each other. It is based on research data (Rigby & Cox & Black, 1997) indicating that both bullies and victims showed lower measures in cooperative skills. Unfortunately results have not proved to be convincing: though children indicated fewer victims at the end of the experiment, the difference was not significant (Rigby, 2002:41-42).

Group work is also used to build assertiveness (work to improve self-confidence and assertiveness in individuals of the group, e.g. children learn how to withstand manipulation, how to handle name-calling, how to step out of a bullying event or keep their calm in stress) (Thompson et al., 2002).

Bystander Training is one of the preventive approaches, and is based on the recognition of the fact that the outcome of bullying largely depends on the bystander, who, even if does not support the bully actively, with his/her presence and passive encourages him/her by providing the bully with an audience. This is why it is extremely important to create an awareness in bystanders that their action and disapproval is decisive in a positive outcome of the event. For this the training needs to achieve that children recognize bullying and can make correct decisions, and either by asking for help, or with a conscious choice from their own strategies and intervening they can affect the case in a positive way (DfES Anti-Bullying Pack: Smith & Samara, 2003).

School watch, originally developed by South-Wales police, is the method where pupils of the school take responsibility for a safe and healthy environment all over the school and in the neighbourhood. To achieve this, a group - with teachers and police taking part - is formed. The group patrol the surroundings, read reports in a bully-box, supervise the area kept for "friends only" in the playground. Schools taking part in this programme reported a decrease in bullying and improvement in school climate (DfES Anti-Bullying Pack, 2000 – Smith & Samara, 2003).

Whole school policy is one of the most often introduced methods, whose efficiency and long-term effects are emphasized. It's based on the belief that bullying behaviour is recognizable and can be turned into a right direction by a systematic transformation of the school's social environment. The teachers and pupils of the school put together a set of anti-bullying initiatives and policies regarding the whole of school life. These include roles, responsibilities and procedures of school staff and personnel, rules of behaviour for students, consequences of bullying, regulations on how bullying is dealt with. The clear and consistent rules are advertised for everybody at school, and are constantly developed. School life is regularly evaluated based on these rules. In working out and developing these anti-bullying measures, beside teachers, pupils and parents, local authorities, counsellors and psychologists also participate. Apart from support in theory the school promotes a safe environment by enhanced supervision in the breaks, on the playground, in the schoolyard, and by making the whole area of the school safe (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

Steps regarding the physical environment

Steps outlined so far focused on members of the community. Steps focusing on improving the physical environment to avoid bullying form a different group among anti-bullying approaches. Among these playground supervision, training playground supervisors and the improvement of the environmental quality and educational use of the school grounds are some of the methods among the possibilities. Playground supervision is a step often taken to improve the playground or school yard in order to avoid unsupervised activity or to facilitate creative activities. Playground supervisors are educated about bullying to help them recognize and tackle these acts. They also learn how to help children in spending their time meaningfully and in playing games. These methods reduce boredom-based bullying, both children and adults become aware of bullying, interpersonal

interaction is improved, and children learn how to use their time in a meaningful way (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Also, publications indicating where most bullying happens are made available to decrease the possibility of bullying around the school.

Assessing the procedures

There are few sources documenting the usefulness of the above methods and approaches in their whole and in comparison. One reason for this is that different institutes choose different methods, this way locations of different conditions cannot be compared. Another reason is that often data showing success come from the institute / company developing the method, which makes their data unreliable. Beyond these assessments an overarching evaluation measuring and assessing the same methods is rare to find. Although the following evaluation is part of a report – and is not of a scholarly article- this is the only source that gives information about most of the methods in use and also their efficiency. Data from the 2003 evaluation of the improved version of the 1994 British Anti-bullying Pack, the 2000 DfES Anti-Bullying Pack, show a summary of the schools using the pack. The Pack was first introduced in 1994, and made available for all public schools in Britain free. Although not all schools made a full use of the pack, slowly it started to be more widely used. The results of the first evaluation carried out in 1996 made the authors rewrite the pack. The second version was made available in 2000, and was evaluated again in 2002, published in 2003. The results are broken down into three age groups and are shown in the table below, with the most successful methods of the age-group highlighted.

Table 2. Results of efficiency from the 2003 Evaluation of the 2000 DfES Anti-Bullying Pack

Intervention / Approach	Percentages of respondents rating the Pack as <i>useful</i> and <i>extremely useful</i> in setting up and running the intervention		
	infant	primary	secondary
Whole school approach	71,4	61,7	80,7
Video film	33,3	56,7	56
Drama, role play	20	51,2	26,9
Literature	0	46,4	40,9
Cooperative group work	0	61,4	40,7
Circle time	25	56,9	52,6
Circle of friends	0	53,1	22,2
Befriending	50	40,7	38,9
School watch	0	17,7	0
Support group approaches (No Blame Approach, Method of Shared Concern)	0	47,4	43,8
Adult mediation	25	49	37,9
Peer mediation	50	45,2	43,8
Assertiveness training groups	0	29,4	41,7
Working with victims	0	53	37,5
School tribunals / Bully courts	0	13,4	20
Involving parents	25	51,	30,8
Cooperation with parents of bullies and victims	33,4	40,5	28,6
Developing a playground policy	14,3	51,7	16,7
Training playground supervisors	28,6	52,2	37,5
Improving the environmental quality and educational use of the grounds	20	52,3	26,7

Source: Smith & Samara, 2003

The reason why the whole school approach has high numbers is the fact that this approach is a collective one, including several more specific steps in itself. It includes an anti-bullying school policy, which British schools are required to have since 1999 by law. This policy lays down rules and sanctions, and might outline other steps taken to reduce bullying.

Smith and Samara's 2008 evaluation compares the efficiency of the same steps and also compares the 1996 and 2000 results. Table 3 sums up the results.

Table 3.

Intervention / Approach	Mean satisfaction with intervention on a five-point scale (s.d. in brackets)	
	1996	2002
Whole school approach	3.9 (0.7)	3.9 (0.7)
Video film	3.2 (1.0)	3.4 (1.0)
Drama, role play	3.7 (0.9)	3.7 (0.8)
Literature	3.3 (1.1)	3.5 (0.7)
Cooperative group work	N.A.	3.8 (0.7)
Circle time	N.A.	4.1 (0.7)
Circle of friends	N.A.	3.5 (1.0)
Befriending	N.A.	3.6 (0.8)
School watch	N.A.	2.8 (1.1)
Support group approaches (No Blame Approach, Method of Shared Concern)	3.5 (1.2)	3.5 (1.1)
Adult mediation	N.A.	3.7 (0.7)
Peer mediation	3.1 (1.0)	3.5 (0.8)
Assertiveness training groups	3.4 (0.9)	3.2 (0.1)
Working with victims	N.A.	3.7 (0.8)
School tribunals / Bully courts	1.8 (1.2)	2.6 (1.0)
Involving parents	N.A.	3.9 (0.7)
Cooperation with parents of bullies and victims	N.A.	3.7 (0.7)
Developing a playground policy	N.A.	3.7 (1.0)
Training playground supervisors	3.9 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)
Improving the environmental quality and educational use of the grounds	3.9 (0.9)	3.8 (0.9)

Source: Samara & Smith, 2008

The analysis reports a growth in the systematic work schools used in working against bullying and also in evaluating the work done (Samara & Smith, 2008:14).

As the figures show, the two least successful measures were School tribunals / Bully courts and Schoolwatch. The most successful one is Circle time, which also proved to be successful in the 2003 evaluation with the primary and secondary age children. Most of the methods score in the higher 3 values and do not show significant differences neither across the different techniques, nor across the two times of evaluation.

Summary

It is easy to see that although there is a huge variety of techniques, methods and approaches to combat bullying, results on their efficiency are not always convincing. What is more, results published are rarely supported by scientific evidence. What no conclusion should however exclude is the fact that only a very careful study of the whole phenomenon and its complexity

can attempt improvement. Context is also a very important aspect: a method can prove to be successful in one experiment and show no improvement in another, as it has been the case with the earliest anti-bullying programme as well. (The Olweus anti-bullying programme in Bergen resulted in a 50% decrease in bullying, whereas the same programme in Rogaland resulted in an increase. Researchers point out differences – less committed staff, less cooperation with experts - that might result in a difference of this size. However, a high degree of cooperation with experts can also result in staff feeling less committed and more incompetent, which might decrease improvement.)

All the diversity is not to be taken as discouraging – on the contrary, it should remind those responsible to make informed decisions and do consistent work.

References

- COWIE, H. & SHARP, S. (1996): *Peer counselling in schools: a time to listen*. David Fulton, London.
- MENESINI, E. & SANCHEZ, V & FONZI, A. & ORTEGA, R. & COSTABILE, A. & LO FEUDO, G. (2003): Moral emotions and bully: A cross-national comparison of differences between victims, bullies, and outsiders. *Aggressive Behavior*, 29, pp. 515-530.
- NAILOR, P. & COWIE, H. (1999): The effectiveness of peer support systems in challenging school bullying: The perspectives and experiences of teachers and pupils. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22, pp. 467-479.
- OLWEUS, D. (2001): Peer harassment. A critical analysis and some important issues. In: Juvonen & Graham, S. (Eds.): *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized*. Guilford Press, New York, pp. 3-20.
- PIKAS, A. (2002): New Developments of the Shared Concern Method. *School Psychology International*, 23 (3), pp. 307-326.
- RIGBY, K. & COX, I. K. & BLACK, G. (1997): Cooperativeness and bully/victim problems among Australian schoolchildren. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 137 (3), pp. 357-368.
- RIGBY, K. (1998): Peer relations at school and the health of children. *Youth Studies Australia*, 17 (1), pp. 13-17.
- RIGBY, K. (2002): *A meta-evaluation of methods and approaches to reducing bullying in pre-schools and in early primary school in Australia*. Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.
- SAMARA, M. & SMITH, P. K. (2008): How schools tackle bullying, and the whole school policies: changes over the last decade. *Educational Psychology*, 28 (6), pp. 663-676.
- SMITH, P. K., & SHARP, S. (Eds.) (1994): *School Bullying: Insights and Perspectives*. Routledge, London.
- SMITH, P. K. & HOWARD, S. J. & THOMPSON, F. (2007): Use of the Support Group Method to tackle bullying, and evaluation from schools and local authorities in England. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 25, pp. 4-13.
- SMITH, P. K. & SAMARA, M. (2003): *Evaluation of the DfES Anti-Bullying Pack*. Research Brief. No. RBX 06-03. DfES, London.
- SMITH, P. K. & TALAMELLI, L. & COWIE, H. & NAYLOR, P. & CHAUHAN, P. (2004): Profiles of non-victims, escaped victims, continuing victims, and new victims of school bullying. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, pp. 565-581.
- SUCKLING A. & TEMPLE, C. (2002): *Bullying: A Whole-school approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- THOMPSON, D. & ARORA, T. & SHARP, S. (2002): *Bullying: Effective Strategies for long-term improvement*. Routledge, London & New York.