Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

Research shows that some groups of young people are more likely to experience bullying than others. The Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Anti-Bullying Alliance have worked together to develop some top tips for schools on how to reduce discriminatory bullying.

Firstly, understand what your school must do:

Each national government has its own legislation, policy and guidance around preventing and tackling bullying, keeping children safe and promoting their wellbeing.

In addition, all schools – or education authorities in Scotland – have to show due regard to the public sector equality duty (PSED). This means your school leadership team needs to actively consider this duty when developing your anti-bullying policy and when reviewing evidence of bullying at your school to ensure your efforts to prevent and tackle discriminatory bullying are targeted and effective.

The PSED covers those with 'relevant protected characteristics': age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation.

To prevent discriminatory bullying, use a whole school approach. Look at the culture of the whole school and consider:

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Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

Creating a school culture and ethos that reflects the importance of feeling safe, and being part of an inclusive and supportive community:
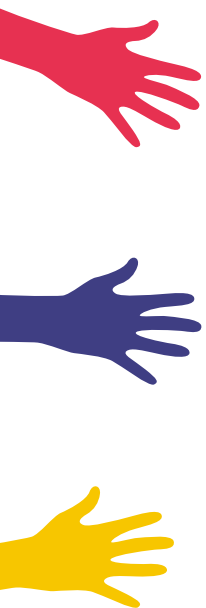
- Ensure staff and pupils understand what behaviour is expected of them. Acknowledge that discrimination exists in wider society, and that it can lead to discriminatory bullying in schools. Be clear that reports of this behaviour will be taken extremely seriously and that such behaviour won't be tolerated.

- Make sure all protected characteristics are acknowledged within your anti-bullying policy.

- Involve young people in the development of anti-bullying policies. You can also work with pupils to choose words or phrases that represent the ethos you want to uphold as a school. Involving young people in these activities creates buy in, and it is a great way to discuss attitudes and behaviours that exist in the school community.

- Create a talking culture in your school where any hurtful behaviour is quickly brought out in the open, discussed and dealt with.

Celebrating difference:

- There are many opportunities to celebrate difference within schools. Cherish diversity in your pupils and make it possible for any pupil to thrive in your school environment.

- Build understanding about difference by teaching and incorporating it into school life. For example, teach pupils about different races, cultures and religions and have visible role models and positive images of disabled people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), women, people from different faiths and minority communities across school.

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Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

- Acknowledge that the school community, including pupils, staff members, governors and families, will include disabled people, people of different races, ages, faiths backgrounds, and people who will be LGBT. Make clear that such diversity is welcome in the school community. This should of course be done without "outing" anyone who does not wish to make an aspect of their identity known.

- Communicate to parents and carers information about how you're making the school supportive of diversity. If appropriate, signpost to opportunities for them to develop their own understanding of other cultures and identities.

Using the language of diversity:

- Ensure all school staff feel comfortable and confident talking about all kinds of difference. Children will pick up on teachers and other staff who feel uncomfortable. Create opportunities for staff to discuss their feelings and feel confident in talking about all types of diversity.

- Consider how you use language and whether you are reinforcing "norms" that don't represent your pupils or their families. This may mark them out as different and a potential target for bullying. For example, not all pupils will be sure of their gender and they may not come from a heterosexual two-parent family.

- Challenge all forms of offensive or discriminatory language among your pupils and staff, including language which can be seen as sexist or homophobic "banter". Even if you don't think it's significant, discriminatory language can create attitudes and environments where bullying is more likely to happen. This applies to online and offline language.

Including and involving all pupils:

- The best efforts of adults sometimes lead to a young person becoming isolated or disempowered and a potential bullying target. For example, if a pupil works closely with a teaching assistant, make sure that doesn't prevent them from making friends, interacting with their peers and learning to be independent.

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Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

- If a pupil has a difference that is not visible to others, for example, a hidden disability, special educational or additional support needs or undisclosed gender identity or sexual orientation, make sure you work with them to discuss what information they want to share with peers. As with all children, support them to define themselves and take the lead in their own lives.

- Review school policies and practices to ensure they support the development of an inclusive environment.

  For example:

  - assess whether the school recognises and accommodates different religious practices,

  - check you are making reasonable adjustments to enable disabled children to participate in all aspects of school life, and

  - consider what steps can be taken to meet the specific needs of trans children

- Pupil surveys are a good way to understand pupil wellbeing and their experiences of bullying. Conducting these annually will highlight active trends and issues within the school setting.

Empowering staff and pupils:

- Ensure all members of staff feel confident in tackling different types of bullying behaviour, including prejudiced language. Discuss with staff any concerns they have about addressing bullying and their ideas on how to improve the school's response to it. Support them to develop their own confidence and knowledge in tackling bullying and supporting pupils effectively.

- Ensure that children understand their rights. School is a place where they have the right to feel safe, to be themselves and to communicate any concerns they have about bullying. This can help address issues around a "snitch culture".

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Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

- Prevent sexual or sexist bullying by supporting children and young people to understand puberty and sexual development; to recognise harmful sexual behaviour; to learn about consent, and to communicate concerns about sexual bullying.

- All children and young people, regardless of their age, developmental needs, or disability, need to be empowered to say no to any physical touch or approach that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable. Teach techniques such as saying, 'no, I don't want to' or rehearsing responses they feel comfortable using.

- Take time to talk to pupils about what it feels like to be in your school, whether there are any bullying hot spots and if there is anything you could do differently to stop bullying.

When discriminatory bullying occurs:

- Make sure that your reporting system for bullying is flexible, accessible and confidential for everyone. Pay particular attention to the needs of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs / additional support needs. to ensure that they can report bullying.

- Take every report of bullying seriously. It can be very harmful to a young person if their reports are dismissed.

- Children should never be told to just ignore it, or to change who they are. It is the children doing the bullying that need to change their behaviour and their attitude. This is particularly true if the bullying is targeted at a pupil's gender, sexuality, race, faith, disability or special educational need / additional support need.

- Avoid stereotypes when it comes to tackling bullying. For example, it is not true that girls are "bitchy" and boys have a punch up and get over it. Anyone can be capable of bullying behaviour and it has a serious impact on everyone involved.

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Tips for tackling discriminatory bullying

- Take time to find out who else is involved. Bullying is very rarely one-on-one behaviour. Getting the wider group to change their behaviour can mean the ringleader doesn't get as much out of it and can help it to stop.

- Know where and when to get outside advice or access specific support services to support the needs of victims and/or perpetrators of bullying. This may be particularly useful when those involved in bullying are coming to terms with their gender or their sexual orientation.

- Monitor the levels of discriminatory bullying in school so you can take action to prevent and tackle it in an informed way. Make sure you can identify if there is a difference in the levels of bullying for disabled pupils, LGBT pupils, genders and race and faith minority groups.

- Learn from bullying incidents and pupil surveys and use this to revise anti-bullying policies and prevention measures.

For more information about how to prevent and tackle bullying, visit:

www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying

www.respectme.org.uk

www.endbullying.org.uk

www.gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/wellbeing/antibullying/?lang=en

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