The Support Group Approach to Bullying in Schools

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Summary

The Kingston upon Hull Special Educational Needs Support Service (SENSS) Anti-Bully ing Project has developed the support group approach to bullying, building particularly on the work of Maines and Robinson (1991, 1992). This article reports on the outcome of this type of intervention. It provides independent corroborative evidence of Maines and Robinson's findings and outlines the theoretical framework that leads to an understanding of why this approach is so successful.

Introduction

The anti-bullying pack *Bullying - don't suffer in silence* (DfE,1994), gave guidance to schools based on research and practice developed by the Department for Education (DfE) anti-bullying project in Sheffield. It promoted the message that bullying is to be found in all schools and that the issue of bullying should be addressed by developing whole school policies. One section, 'Working with pupils in bullying situations', reviewed the effectiveness across a range of schools of different intervention strategies, including the No *Blame Approach.*

The *No Blame Approach* to bullying, developed by Barbara Maines and George Robinson, was first outlined in *Educational Psychology in Practice* (1991) and published as a distance learning pack in 1992. The approach addresses bullying by forming a support group of 'bullies' and/or bystanders. Without apportioning blame, it uses a problem-solving approach, giving responsibility to the group to solve the problem and to report back at a subsequent review meeting. The authors are confident on the training video that this method is tried and tested and it works.

The *No Blame Approach* had not been included in the Sheffield Project but was mentioned in the

review because it is similar to the *Method of Shared Concern* (Pikas, 1989) and because the training materials are easily accessible to schools. The general conclusion was that this type of approach may be worth trying.

Since the publication of the DfE pack, the *No Blame Approach* has been reviewed in more detail (Smith and Sharp, 1994). The results look promising to say the least: 45 out of 47 interventions in secondary and 7 out of 7 interventions in primary schools having been successful. However, it was concluded that independent replication and further rationale on how or why the approach is effective would be valuable.

Background

The Special Educational Needs Support Service in Kingston upon Hull has an established anti-bullying project. One aspect of the work is to advise and support schools over individual referrals for bullying situations. In the majority of cases there has been a long-standing problem. Concern has been expressed, and ultimately complaints have been made, to the school, followed in some cases by the parent contacting the local education authority. With the head's approval, the referral may be passed to SENSS. By the very nature of the referral process, the complaints tend to be serious - indeed the police may have been involved, there may have been a medical referral, the problem may have been going on for years and the child may be absent from school.

Over a period of 2 years the service dealt with over 80 referrals that required active involvement beyond advice over the phone. In some referrals the support group approach was not appropriate for a variety of reasons: for example, a pupil not returning to the same school, being on study leave, or actively not wishing any intervention to take place.

Inevitably, each referral has its own individual characteristics. Although no referral is typical, some features, while not occurring in every case, occur frequently enough to be called typical.

The parents' perspective

The parent(s) of the bullied child are often the first people with whom the problem is discussed:

1. They are very often worried, upset and frustrated because they feel powerless to defend their child, frightened to intervene directly because this might make things worse, or indeed having intervened, they have made things worse. They often become distressed when talking about their child being bullied and about their frustration with not being able to act effectively.
2. They often say that no-one at the school will listen to them, that they are not taken seriously, that they are told they are over-reacting or are over-protective.
3. They are often considering changing schools, perhaps not for the first time. The parents may be asking for advice on transfer and can be quite adamant that their child is not returning to their present school.
4. Occasionally they say the school has done all it can, but the bullying continues and the bully ought to be expelled, since they cannot think of any alternative solution.
5. Parents often report that non-physical bullying has preceded physical bullying. The fact that bullying seems to be taken less seriously if it is not physical, notwithstanding that verbal bullying can be extremely hurtful, may be one reason that more referrals involve boys, since we know that boys are more likely to bully in a physical way (Smith and Sharp, 1994, p 16).
6. Sometimes bullying has started to happen outside school.
7. Parents can also be quite defensive about their complaint. They think that they may be judged to be wanting in the way they have brought up their child. They may be concerned that they cannot afford to buy fashionable, expensive clothes and shoes.
8. By way of corroboration, they often say that the school has lots of bullying and that various people were concerned about it - it wasn't just their child being picked on. The fact that brothers or sisters do not have difficulties, or that other children in the school do, is also cited in their defence.

9. A disproportionate number of children referred have special educational needs, such as learning difficulties or speech problems (Whitney et al, 1994).
10. Frequently parents report bed wetting as a problem at home, also nightmares, mood swings, temper tantrums, uncharacteristic disobedience and aggression, withdrawn behaviour and complaints of illness before school such as tummy upsets and headaches.

The parents may have wanted severe punishment of the bully in the first instance but this is because they know of no other approach that could be successful. Incidentally the term 'No Blame' is not used, since parents may take this to imply that the bullying is condoned, which is not the case. The support group approach is outlined to the parents and the reasons why this approach may be appropriate in their case.

Often the child may want to change schools, although we indicate that it is possible that they may find themselves being bullied again. A change of school, moreover, would not stop the bullying round the home, whereas in our experience support groups operate outside school as well as in. We can assure parents that this type of approach has a high success rate, and with immediate effectiveness, although a change of school can still be an option if necessary.

Teachers' perspective

Although parents may have said that 'nothing has been done', this is rarely the case. Teachers have usually taken various steps along the line of punishment, but very often have found difficulty in getting to the bottom of incidents. School staff, however, may not have told the parent what has been done, and if the bullying continues the parent assumes that nothing was done. Once teachers have tried various strategies such as counselling, punishment and, perhaps, contacting the parents of the 'bullies', and if the bullying does not stop, there appears to be a shift in sympathy away from the victim. Some victims and their families are seen as problems themselves in the school:

1. The victim or their siblings may be disruptive.
2. Their parents may indeed be overprotective or even aggressive.
3. Signs of distress and anxiety may not be apparent in the school and the child's expressed fears are sometimes dismissed as attention seeking.

4. Occasionally a teacher will say that a victim 'frankly deserves all they get'. As long as it is seen as somehow acceptable to bully some children, regardless of the reason, there is implicit permission to bully in that school.

We recommend using the support group approach to teachers as a better solution because:
- no sanctions are used and therefore no one can be unfairly punished
- school staff would be seen to be taking action following DfEE guidance
- the children would be involved in a positive approach; they would enjoy it
- it has proved to be effective in similar cases before
- a member of staff is present if the co-ordinator is leading the intervention so that the strategy is demonstrated; otherwise there is a possibility that teachers do not feel they can operate this approach for themselves.

Teachers are sometimes sceptical that the parents will accept this type of approach, thinking that the parents are bent on punishment for the bullies. In fact, parents have been generally quite ready to accept that this might work, as it is not usually punishment but effectiveness they are after.

Intervening with the support group approach

The support group approach has been identified separately because it contains some features which differ from Maines and Robinson but the same step-by-step description of the strategy is used for ease of reference. Where divergencies from the *No Blame Approach* occur these are printed in italics.

Step 1

The victim is interviewed first, sometimes at home if they are away from school. Concentrating on the kind of things that have been happening rather than particular incidents, the victim is allowed to to talk about whatever they think needs to be known. This might include the whole history of the problem, or very little about it. All that is said is accepted in a non-judgemental way, without questioning its validity. *We do not concentrate on the feelings of the victim or request a picture or piece of writing to illustrate them.* Questions such as 'What did you do to make him do that to you?' or similar under-

mine the victim's confidence and are unnecessary. The victim is told that the bullies will not be in trouble so there will be no problems that they will 'get him/her for it later'. Without this assurance, the victim may be reluctant to give any names. The purpose of this interview is to reassure the victim that the problem can be solved and find out:
- who are the main threatening figures, the 'bullies'
- who are present although they may not actively join in the bullying, the 'bystanders'
- *who the victim finds supportive or, if he has no supporters, whom he would like to have as friends.*

The victim is told that the group will be asked to help make him/her happier in school.

Step2

From these names a support group is made up, ideally 6-8 pupils. All the main bullies are included with some bystanders *and supporters*. The support group often needs reassurance at the beginning that they are not in trouble. The pupils are often unsure of why they have been selected, since they are not all 'bullies' or 'friends'. *It is important that no child is labelled by their selection for the group and having a truly mixed group facilitates this.* The group is seen separately from the victim. The group is told that X is unhappy in school, and they have been chosen because they are all able to help. Group members seem to accept the rationale that they can all help; indeed this is what they have in common. *At this point the term bullying is avoided since this suggests a judgement has been made on the nature and causes of the problem.* It is equally important, as with the interview with the victim, that a non-judgemental atmosphere is maintained. However, very often the group members use the term anyway. Once the reason for the group is clear and they do not feel threatened, they can be remarkably open about what is happening.

Step 3

Empathy for the victim is heightened *by asking if they have ever been unhappy in school. Usually there are at few who will admit to this and say a little about it. The feelings of the victim are not relayed to the group, as Maines and Robinson suggest. Rather, we discuss briefly the feelings of members of the group that have been unhappy in school and say that 'X must be feeling very like that'. This is an effective means of raising empathy without breaching confidentiality.*

Step 4

It is explained that no one should feel unhappy in school and because they know X they probably know better than anyone why and when he or she is unhappy. Members of the group often volunteer information that can be very illuminating at this point. If anyone mentions a name, they are gently interrupted and told there is no need for any names, in order to maintain the non-judgemental atmosphere. Again all that is said can be accepted, since no punitive action will follow as a result of this discussion.

Step 5

The group is asked to make suggestions. Because they know what goes on they are the best people to suggest what can be done to make the situation better for X. We wait for suggestions from them. This part of the process is very variable; some groups are full of ideas, others are very vague or there may be some resentful silence. Simply ignoring resentment and praising any suggestions from members of the group usually ensures that most will either have made a suggestion of their own or will take up a suggestion that someone else has made so that all have a role. The actual suggestions are not in themselves significant except insofar as they demonstrate a commitment to the group goal. Members say things such as 'I will bring him/her some sweets', 'I will watch out for her/him at break to make sure s/he is not alone', 'I will help him/her in class'. The only suggestion that has to be gently rejected is of the kind - 'If I see anyone hurting her/him I'll beat them up'! They are not asked to make any promises and are not given jobs. The plan must be owned by the group. If suggestions are not forthcoming, which has happened occasionally, exploring further the circumstances when upset occurs generally gets ideas flowing.

Step 6

Group members are thanked for their support and told that it looks like they have a good plan that will make all the difference to X. Then they are told that they can report back all they have managed to do in a week's time. In other words, the responsibility is passed to the group at this point. The shift of ownership of the plan and the transfer of the responsibility for its implementation to the whole group is crucial. This is the most

powerful single feature of the approach. Inevitably, sometimes, this initial meeting goes better than others but it is curious that no matter how it is seen subjectively, this does not appear to be reflected at all in the outcome.

Step 7

At the review the victim is seen first to see how things have gone. Generally, things are fine. This review usually takes about 2-5 minutes. *The victim is complimented on things going well; attention is not withdrawn because there is no trouble or a provocative victim may be inadvertently encouraged.*

The support group members are then seen together and asked how things are going. Usually they are aware the victim is happier although they may occasionally report on an incident not involving members of the support group. Many times they express the improvement in terms of 'He/she is better now', as if they view the problem as lying within the victim. They are encouraged to say how they have helped although their efforts are not matched with the suggestions made at the previous meeting, unless individuals wish to do so. They are also complimented and thanked for their help. *Then they are asked if they are willing to continue for another week.* No one has ever refused to do this in our experience. On one occasion a group member was unwilling to come to the review meeting and apparently tried to persuade two others to refuse to come but by the following week the other two were eager to come and the dissenter, who was one of the identified bullies, had not bullied the victim further. *A new review is arranged as before. Reviews can be continued for as long as necessary but usually two reviews have been sufficient.* This avoids creating a false sense of dependency. Individuals can be reinforced informally from then on. *It is usually arranged for the whole group, victim as well as supporters, to receive an appropriate reward to reinforce the new status.* They may get a certificate or a letter home to parents. Having their photograph taken is very rewarding to primary pupils and it can go up in their classroom or a notice board. In secondary school of course the reinforcement needs to be more subtle.

The parents are asked for their views on how things are going and value being kept informed after each review. When they feel involved and therefore not frustrated this can often help rebuild the relationship with the school which was usually strained beforehand.

Evaluation of the support group approach

Over the 2 year period, in *55* cases (over 70 per cent of referrals), the support group approach was used, usually by the SENSS anti-bullying coordinator or occasionally by the school. These referrals are predominantly from primary schools - 51 primary and four secondary. The approach has been successful in the great majority of cases - to be precise, the bullying stopped completely or the victim no longer felt in need of support. Table 1 shows the results for primary school only, because this is where the weight of our experience is to date.

Table 1. Support group approach

Number of 51
Cases

Not completed	1	Child excluded		
Successful	50 (100%)	Immediate success	40	(80%)
		Success delayed	7	(14%)
		Limited success	3	(6%)

The cases have been further sub-divided in order to clarify the criteria by which they have been judged. 'Immediate success' is where, from the time the group was set up, the victim reported little or no difficulties, the support group agreed, and the parents of the victim (when involved) were happy that the bullying had stopped. Leaving aside the one case not able to be completed, 80 per cent of cases fell into this category. However, in a minority of cases, identified as 'success delayed' in the table, the victim was not entirely happy at the first review, or the support group thought things were not satisfactory. In these cases the situation improved over the following 3 to 5 weekly reviews, until it appeared to be stable with no bullying taking place. In a small minority of cases the victim continued to mention incidents that bothered him/her, although there had been considerable improvement. In these cases, identified as 'limited success' in the table, the intervention was monitored until there was stability at a 'tolerable' level for the victim but the victim was re-referred subsequently for being bullied by different pupils.

Of the four cases in secondary school during the same period, two were immediate successes, one child did not return to school at all and one transferred to another school early during intervention. On this basis the support group approach appears to be an effective intervention at secondary level, and subsequent referrals continue to reinforce this view. When choosing the support group in a secondary school an additional-check needs to be made whether there are members of the support group in every set or grouping to which the pupil belongs that he/she finds a problem.

The confidence of Maines and Robinson has been substantiated in our experience, so much so that now SENSS advises the schools to adopt this approach, unless there are compelling and usually obvious reasons why it would not be appropriate.

Why does the support group approach work?

An approach so successful deserves to be better known and more widely used. Perhaps one of the reasons it appears not to be widely accepted is implicit in Smith and Sharp's review (1994), when they suggest that it is not known why it works. Maines and Robinson only begin to give any rationale.

Although Smith and Sharp (1994) draw attention to the *No Blame Approach* in the DfE anti-bullying pack for schools, it is with a certain tentativeness. They suggest that this type of approach may used in less serious cases of bullying (DfE, 1994, p 18-19). Their suggestion that the *No Blame Approach* needs independent verification also sounds a note of caution. Why are they are so cautious in the light of available evidence? Trying to understand the causes of behavioural change is not always a 'common sense' pursuit. Despite knowing that a reprimand can in some circumstances reward disruptive pupils, it is still difficult to practice this in the classroom. It takes practice and considerable restraint for a teacher to avoid reinforcing misbehaviour.

Teachers also often have difficulty rewarding a decrease in misbehaviour, thinking that it is somehow not right that a child is rewarded for behaviour that in other pupils is expected and taken for granted. Maines and Robinson (1992) indicate that there is a 'natural' desire to punish the bully and that it is often asked what the parents of the victim think of the strategy proposed, with the implication that they will be dissatisfied with a non-punitive response. In one of our referrals, teachers objected to the bullies being given any reward. No parent has ever objected - they are only too happy their nightmare has ceased. While there is no clear, rational explanation for the approach working, and where

schools have tried to address the problem with little success, it does seem unbelievable that a relatively low-key approach will have any impact. If the strategy is not open to plausible explanation it is unlikely to gain widespread adoption.

However, we have turned to 'brief therapy' and social psychology, especially group psychology, to give us insights into why and how the strategy works. In the Kingston upon Hull Anti-Bullying project the original Maines and Robinson approach has been developed. The differences are small and we fully acknowledge the *No Blame Approach* as our starting point. However, it is believed that the following exposition demonstrates the changes are significant.

Brief therapy

The support group approach can be viewed as an example of applied brief therapy. Brief therapy has been developed in the USA over the last 20 years in particular, and recently by practitioners in this country (Budman et al, 1992). It is recognised not only for its powerful effect in clinical settings but for its application to situations such as in education. It is pre-eminently associated with de Shazer (1985; 1988). Brief therapy originally developed from a mood of dissatisfaction with traditional psychoanalysis that tends to be long-term. Moreover, the number of sessions of therapy began to be limited by the health insurance available in the USA so that long-term therapy was only available to the rich. Reducing the number of sessions available for the therapist to work, initially thought of as a necessary evil, led to a realisation that better and more successful therapeutic sessions could be developed.

It was also recognised that many clients only attended the first session of psychotherapy. In order to be effective, brief therapists took account of this and developed a concentrated structure of questions to move clients towards the solution, rather than concentrating on the feelings and experiences within the problem.

When working to manipulate a system, small changes can lead to profound changes. Indeed, any changes in a system will inevitably lead to further change. Solving the problem, therefore, concerns making the small difference that makes all the difference, creating a virtuous instead of vicious circle (Wender, 1971). Brief therapy takes a direct route to a solution, eliciting from the client those crucial small differences that will bring about the necessary changes that solve the problem.

From the beginning the therapist is positive, convincing and optimistic - the problem can be addressed and will be solved by focusing, for example, on what happens when the problem is *not* there. When the 'miracle' has happened (de Shazer, 1985;1988), what will be going on? Brief therapy is solution-, rather than problem- focused; future- rather than past-oriented.

Several brief therapy techniques can be recognised in the support group approach. For example, one of the apparently contradictory principles of brief therapy is that the solution has nothing to do with the problem. Indeed, there is no need to even know what the problem is to find a solution. Using the support group approach as outlined above, although we allow parents to tell their complaint in whatever detail they think necessary, it does not in fact matter what the details of the complaint are. Equally the victim may be forthcoming or may be very reticent but again it does not matter, since the solution is independent of the problem. In order to use a solution-focused support group it is necessary only to find out the names of those in the child's social system who are involved in maintaining the problem. Although teachers are often anxious to say what they have done to address the problem, again it does not matter what they say, in the sense that it has no impact on the solution. In this way the support group is a 'skeleton key' (de Shazer, 1985), a solution that fits rather than matches, and is all the more powerful for that, because it can unlock a wide range of individual problem circumstances. Creating 'virtuous circles' relies on the suggestions from the group, to break the 'vicious circle' of the problem and initiate a process of continued change for the better.

As in brief therapy, the means to a solution are not found in the knowledge or expertise of the leader of the group or how well the staff understand the situation, or whether we actually know what has been going on but in the group members themselves. They make the suggestions of what they think will make the difference.

The process changes perceptions of behaviour, creating new 'stories' for the protagonists that enhance their own self-esteem and are, therefore, self-reinforcing of the change taking place. Added to this, the leader gives feedback of compliments in such a way that creates the likelihood that the action will be implemented - what is called 'cheering on change' (George et al, 1990).

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) were the first to recognise and provide models for applying brief therapy to classroom management of children with behaviour problems. They refer to their ideas as an 'ecosystemic' approach. As they put it, 'Sometimes

these changes seemed to occur instantaneously, as if by magic' and, 'Since ecosystemic ideas are intended to to help change problem situations instead of to diagnose or "treat" a particular type of problem, they can be used in a large number of very different problem situations in schools' (page xiv). Molnar and Lindquist do not however address a bullying problem in their many case studies (see also Rhodes and Ajmal, 1995; Durrant, 1993).

The support group approach to bullying is such an ecosystemic approach. It is powerful and effective but gentle - just as an anti-bullying response should be. In the best tradition of conflict resolution the strategy provides a win-win outcome.

There is, of course, evidence that using a peer support group in the same manner could help children through a variety of difficulties. Newton et al (1996), for example, have recognised the power of the peer group that is empowered to intervene appropriately and effectively to support a classmate. The benefits to the members of the group themselves are enormous.

Social psychology

The reason the support group approach appears to work is not only because it is effective and immediate but also because the solution develops outside the direct influence of the teacher. It is the dynamics of the support group acting both as a group and as individuals in interaction with the victim that gives the strategy force. Maines and Robinson suggest that raising empathy for the victim of bullying is a key component of the *No Blame Approach*. Indeed, they concentrate on the feelings of the victim as an important part of the procedure. They suggest that relaying to the support group how the victim feels raises this empathy. However, we have come to concentrate less on the victim's feelings without jeopardising the success of the intervention. We do not need to relay any other information to the group other than that the victim is unhappy.

Social psychologists have studied in depth how 'bystanders' react - what factors motivate people to help and also what may make people unwilling to intervene to support others. Looking at this research together with work on the psychology of groups provides insight into why anti-bullying support groups are so effective.

The research informs us (Brewer and Crano, 1994; Deaux et al, 1993; Baron et al, 1992) that the factors below enhance the likelihood of help being given (all of them are present in the support group approach). Individuals are more likely to help when they:

- have been asked to help and have agreed
- know the need for action is unambiguous, they are not left in any doubt
- have been given some responsibility to act
- have individual responsibility
- know that their action is appropriate
- have witnessed harm even if they were not directly involved
- have their empathy aroused
- know that they will receive feedback of outcomes
- have a specific assigned task
- feel guilty.

In addition, the above research shows that working as part of a group enhances this pro-social affect because:

- each knows their suggestion for action has been accepted
- even if only one member helps initially, the others are likely to follow
- they have made their commitment to action 'public'
- anonymity of any action is reduced
- identifying with a successful group increases self-esteem
- continuance of unhelpful behaviour becomes unacceptable to the group
- in an interdependent group, mutually beneficial behaviour is encouraged
- commitments made during group discussion lead to high levels of co-operation
- defection from a group goal is less likely when the group expects reward.

We can infer what is happening during intervention, even though the action is outside our direct observation. It can be suggested that the main purpose of bullying is not so much the effect it produces in the victim but rather its effect on the bystanders. The support group as a whole has a purpose that transcends any one member. For the group to be successful, the individuals depend not only on their own actions but also on other members of the group. Before a support group is formed it can be assumed that the individuals have mixed motives. For example, the friend may wish to help, the bully may wish to continue to bully. But the group as a whole is given the responsibility for helping. So the bully has to choose either to continue bullying, bolstering his/ her dominant position in the wider peer group, or stop bullying and thereby allow the support group to succeed and maintain a leading position.

In more general terms, people are aroused by the needs of others and then decide whether to intervene by weighing the costs and rewards of helping. If we look at the roles of the people involved in the bullying situation we can see how a support group approach can alter the balance so that the rewards for helping the victim outweigh the costs.

The costs of helping will differ for individuals depending on their former roles.

A bully will lose the excitement associated with aggression and may lose (or expect to lose) the peer group's recognition of their power over others. A bystander loses the excitement and arousal of watching bullying and risks becoming a target for the bully. A friend may just risk becoming a target him/ herself.

All support group members participate in a range of rewards including
- recognition that they belong to a successful group
- freedom from various levels of guilt
- feeling good about their own altruism
- the esteem of other group members or at least not rejection
- recognition and reinforcement from a member of staff guiding the group.

Conclusion

One special educational needs coordinator, who was initially sceptical of the outcome, watched the process and declared it was magic. It sometimes appeared that way when I first used the strategy. However, with further experience the underlying processes at work have become clearer. The approach appears to work at varying levels and in a variety of ways, each complementing the other. These act as 'back-up' systems in case of failure of any one aspect or level, making the support group approach extremely powerful.

Aspects of social psychology help to explain why a support group approach works. An awareness of these factors helps develop practice that reinforces the power of the intervention. Moreover, recognising that the support group approach is an application of brief therapy also helps point the way to strengthening intervention by using further strategies from that field, such as using future-focused questions and the effective use of compliments.

It is intended that this independent corroboration and explanation of the rationale behind the support group approach will lead to effective practice being promoted to help reduce bullying problems in our schools.

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