

Dealing with bullying in schools

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Life in all its fullness – Christian perspective on dealing with bullying in schools

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All Bible quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, unless otherwise stated.

1. Vision statement

Bullying is a growing problem in many of our schools and while a range of government strategies have attempted to address the issue, nothing has been done about dealing with the root of the problem – the heart of the individual. As with every other aspect of life, the Bible has things to say: things that can transform bullies into caring members of a strong, cohesive community and bullied young people into bold, confident people – Paul reminds us of this in his second letter to Timothy:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"

(2 Timothy 3:16-17).

So how can the Bible help?

One answer lies in Christ's words about His purpose: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Life in all its fullness, if it is to mean anything, must mean helping students to understand not just fullness of life in general, but also life in Christ. This should be the guiding vision for Christian schools, encompassing every aspect of the life of each student within the school or college community.

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, our "chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever". Before we can enjoy God we need to meet him and change the direction of our lives. We need to change behaviours which "conform to the pattern of this world" and "be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind" (Romans 12:2). Changing the lives of both the bully and the victim are part of that transformation, and a significant responsibility for schools to meet.

Another answer lies in God's creation of us as uniquely shaped in his image. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them". This is our mandate for the nurturing of a strong, God-centred community – an ethos based on respect for every individual as a unique bearer of the image of God, with

that respect modelled by everyone responsible for the welfare of students. It must also be the lived reality for every member of the community – leaders and managers, teaching and support staff, ancillary staff, students, parents and visitors to the school. It encompasses every aspect of each person's life: physical, academic, social, moral and spiritual.

2. A definition of bullying

It is important to be clear about the definition of bullying – it is not teasing, having an argument with a friend or spiteful comments, although each of these may be part of a cycle of bullying.

Bullying is persistent, planned and prolonged. It takes various forms, including:

- Physical – hitting, kicking, pulling hair, biting, scratching, pinching, tripping or punching. Threats of physical attack can be used to intimidate.
- Verbal – name calling, taunts, slurs, comments.
- Emotional – social isolation, or any form of bullying which causes emotional distress.
- Racial – offensive gestures, racial comments or slurs, mocking a cultural practice.
- Sexual – comments about sexuality or gender, physical abuse or unwanted sexual contact.
- Cyberbullying – the use of the internet in all its forms (social media platforms, texts, sexting, emails) to spread damaging messages and/or images.

Although in general terms girls opt for relational aggression whilst boys use physical aggression, more than one form of bullying is often deployed. There is also growing evidence that cyberbullying is not a separate form of bullying, but an extension of the toolkit deployed by bullies. For victims in today's world, that means that there is no respite from the fear because the bullies can get at you even in the safety of your own bedroom. Going offline leaves you socially

isolated, but staying online opens you to continued abuse, so whatever you do, you lose.

Appendix A contains a list of possible indicators that a student is being bullied.

There should also be an understanding of the difference between bullying and incidents based on prejudice – a comment about a person’s belief, skin colour or sexuality may be motivated by prejudice, so it needs to be dealt with differently – discussing prejudice and learning to recognise it in ourselves should be part of every PSHE programme.

Bullying goes further, because bullies aren’t articulating prejudice, they are intent on harming others to gain power over them. In his first homily of 2018, Pope Francis addressed the issue of bullying, saying that although psychologists offered various explanations for it, it stems from original sin:

‘When we realize that we harbour within ourselves the desire to attack someone because they are weak, we have no doubt: It is the devil. Because attacking the weak is the work of Satan ... What is it within us that pushes us to mock and mistreat others weaker than we are? ... It is understandable when a person resents someone stronger than them, perhaps because of envy ... but toward the weak? What makes us do that? It is something habitual, as if I need to ridicule another person to feel confident; as if it were a necessity.’

(Catholic Herald, ‘Bullying is the Devil’s Work, says Pope Francis’ 9 January 2018)

Dealing with bullying is to deal with the sin in the heart of the bully. The following table highlights the difference between bullying attitudes and Christian attitudes:

Bullying attitude	Christian attitude
wanting power	wanting to serve God and others
wanting to dominate	wanting to build and encourage others
planning to harm	planning to help and care
acting in anger	acting in love
wanting to empower yourself	wanting to become the person God has created you to be
using words to communicate hatred	using words to communicate wisdom
wanting their own way	wanting to be obedient to God
relying on the strength of the crowd and/or silence of others	relying on God and the power of the Holy Spirit

When it comes to using words of hatred or words of wisdom, James reminds us that:

"no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing." (James 3:8-10)

It's simply a matter of choice as to whether we praise or curse.

3. Why is bullying a focal issue?

The issue of bullying has become a key part of education policy in recent years and with good reason. 54% of all children and young people in our country have been bullied at some point during their school lives. 20% have been bullied in the last year. 10% are bullied on an almost daily basis. That's nearly 150,000 children and young people who dread going to school every single day of their lives, for fear of what awaits them. Of those bullied daily, 37% have developed social anxiety, 24% had suicidal thoughts and 36% have developed depression. Bullying can have a significant impact on a student's life outcomes, influencing relationships and health long into adult life.

Policy now focuses in particular detail on the issue of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying. Although the spotlight is firmly on HBT bullying in current policy, statistics show a different picture. 50% of those bullied say it involves attitudes to their appearance; 19% say it relates to them getting high grades, and 14% say it's because of household income. Only 4% report being bullied because of their sexuality. So you are far more likely to be bullied because of your body shape, for wearing glasses or for having red hair than whether you are gay or transgender. (Statistics from Ditch the Label 2017 Annual Bullying Survey)

However, focusing on any one form of bullying above all others is harmful, because it creates a hierarchy which denies the pain and suffering of all victims. The Hawthorne Effect says that if you shine a huge spotlight on an issue over a period of time, you will effect a change simply by your intervention. But shining a spotlight creates deep shadow and that makes others more vulnerable, because bullying is a behaviour choice. If bullies can't pick on one group of people in their school, they'll simply pick on another. Logic dictates that if you're going to get caught easily for choosing those in the spotlight, then you choose people in the shadows where you're less likely to be seen. It isn't about the reason they bully. It's about being a bully. That is the issue which needs to be addressed.

Solving the problem needs to begin in wider society, where bullying is endemic. Schools have a part to play, but it's not down to schools alone to solve the problem. The liberal ideology which says that if we stamp it out in the young we will have a happy society with the next generation won't work, because it doesn't focus on transformation of the heart. When children are

faced with a conflict between words and actions, they always follow the actions. So, whatever is said in the classroom, some children will still become bullies, following examples they see in wider society, in their communities and, sadly, often in their own homes.

4. Policy

Any anti-bullying policy should therefore aim to create a strong, just community within which the equality of each individual bearing a unique imprint of God is acknowledged. It also needs to recognise the problems in wider society which have given rise to the perceived need to gain power and influence.

Children and young people are growing up in a world which predominantly values achievement, particularly where this leads to financial success. An individual's personal significance relies on acceptance by the crowd, or on acceptance by the gatekeepers to power. The equation is: Achievement = Significance = Acceptance. That means that people must compete against each other and it creates hierarchies of acceptance based on achievement. God turns that equation completely the other way around – we are accepted just as we are and we are therefore significant to God. Then we can achieve.

The current growth in bullying is a reflection of a materialistic society which is training the next generation as consumers. Identity politics dominate political thinking and celebrity status is something to be sought after. Social media platforms are used to pour hate-filled rhetoric into the minds of young people. 'Self' is the new god and the concept of the common good is often completely absent. That is a seedbed for bullying, both in wider society and in school and college communities.

Any policy should reflect the fact that we are all equal in the sight of God – equally created in His image and equally in need of forgiveness for our sin. Dealing with bullying is about creating a community in which that is acknowledged – in which each person is respected and in which each and every person has the opportunity to examine what it really means to live life in all its fullness - knowing forgiveness of sin and the transforming love of God.

An effective policy also outlines how bullying incidents will be recorded,

what monitoring processes are put in place, how bullies and victims will be supported and how staff will be trained. All pupils should know to whom an incident should be reported. How to challenge something which is upsetting another pupil and when to leave well alone should also be part of student training. This forms a continuous cycle of activity.

Appendix B contains a sample policy document based on Christian principles.

5. The role of parents

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 leaves us in no doubt that parents are responsible for their children's education:

"These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

This has implications for schools. Parents have chosen to share responsibility for their children's education with a school, but the primary responsibility lies with parents. That means that as long as children are safe, schools have a duty to respect the beliefs and worldview of parents, even where that is at odds with the conventional cultural norms. All students should feel able to express themselves within the school community without fearing that an adult's disapproval, whether spoken or implied, will lead to censure or bullying by peers.

Parents, similarly, have a responsibility to ensure that their child is respectful of others, knowing the difference between respecting a person and respecting the views which they hold. The former is essential in a strong community – the latter is not. It is in understanding that a person can be respected without agreeing with their belief that students can learn to disagree well.

Schools must be clear with parents about how bullying is addressed and how parents will be involved. Parental complaints about bullying can be difficult to

handle as not all allegations are genuine bullying. A clear policy helps parents understand how bullying is defined and how it is dealt with.

6. Understanding bullying

i. Identity

The reason that bullying causes so much damage is that it strikes at the heart of a person's identity.

A guiding principle in relationships can be found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, to whom he wrote:

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Ephesians 4:29).

1 Thessalonians 5:14 also exhorts us to "warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone". Staff are responsible for warning the idle and disruptive, but everyone in the community can take care to build up, encourage and help others. Creating such an ethos goes a long way towards eliminating bullying, because it communicates to everyone in the school that patience, care, thoughtfulness and encouragement are valued beyond status or power.

Much work with both bully and victim focuses on the development of a sense of self-esteem. This is a very difficult entity to measure, as any assessment is dependent primarily on the view of the person themselves. Self-esteem can vary from one situation to another, and how a person derives their sense of personal worth stems from what they value. A gang member who lacks any kind of self-worth in the classroom can feel very sure of their worth within the context of their gang, even though that is not a positive context.

This is another area where God turns current thinking on its head. Philippians 2:3 says: "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself." (NKJV) Esteem

of others is more important than esteem of self. Rather than focus on students' sense of self-worth, point them towards their sense of God-worth. Self-acceptance in the eyes of God is transformative. Self-acceptance based on human values is inward looking and can sometimes be destructive.

This is particularly important for teenagers, for whom peer acceptance becomes more important than that of family. Students are starting to think through the values with which they have been raised and deciding what they want to take into adult life with them. They need courage to be their own person and not simply run with the crowd for security and acceptance. Knowing that they are loved, accepted and forgiven by God can give that courage to be themselves, to assert opinions, beliefs and values when challenged, and to feel a real sense of worth and purpose in life.

ii. Personal development

An effective bullying policy also addresses personal development, both for the bully and the victim. This may be about developing self-control, or about learning to be more assertive.

Assertiveness in dealing with bullying is a useful skill to develop and it is one which is often misunderstood within Christian teaching. The most often quoted verse about dealing with bullying is Matthew 5:38-42: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

This has nothing to do with being a doormat and just taking bullying on the chin. Christ is making altogether a different point. In the Jewish culture, anyone in authority could slap someone under their authority across the right cheek, using the back of their hand. It was a practice which was open to abuse. But if someone turned the left cheek, the abuser was thrown onto the back foot. He couldn't slap the person across the left cheek with the back of his left hand as the left hand was considered unclean. He couldn't use his right hand unless it was in a fist, which was used when fighting. So, he had to walk away.

The abused person had taken control.

The same was true of walking the second mile. A Roman soldier could compel a Jew to carry his pack, but only for one mile. If the pack-bearer walked on into the second mile, the soldier could get into trouble. By continuing to walk, the abused person was taking control, as the soldier would have to ask him to stop and return his pack. Christ was teaching people how to be assertive – how could this apply in a contemporary context? It is helpful to explore with students the difference between aggressive and assertive language, in order to equip them to deal more effectively with aggressive behaviour.

Students need to understand that it's fine to be assertive – it's not unchristian to defend yourself. There is a difference between self-defence and retaliation. The Bible has something to say here, too. The apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21) In other words, don't retaliate or seek revenge. Overcoming evil with good in a school context means that when a student reports being bullied, they can be confident that it will be dealt with in a way which transforms relationships. Increasing numbers of schools are using restorative justice to deal with bullying. This is not a sanction-free pass without punishment, but it doesn't rely solely on punishment. Instead, it helps the bullying person to understand the impact of their actions, bringing them to a point of repentance, forgiveness and ultimately the restoration of a positive relationship.

Knowing how and when to intervene is important; Christ also offers us various examples of this. When Judas Iscariot started complaining about Mary wasting money on the perfume which she poured over Christ's feet, (John 12:1-8) Jesus just told him to "Leave her alone". When a baying mob wanted to stone a woman for having an affair (John 8:1-11), Jesus challenged them, suggesting that anyone of the mob who was perfect should throw the first stone. Faced down by the challenge, the mob melted away. It takes courage to intervene, and wisdom to know when to leave well alone. In all situations, students should report all bullying incidents to the relevant member of staff.

7. Curriculum: examples of bullying in the Bible

If students are to experience life in all its fullness, then this must extend across the whole curriculum. All learning should be underpinned by biblical principles and a Christian worldview, leaving students ample opportunity to examine the validity of this worldview for themselves as part of their learning.

There are also incidents of bullying in the Bible which it could be helpful to consider.

1 Samuel chapter 1 tells the story of Hannah and the birth of the prophet Samuel. Samuel's father, Elkanah, had two wives, Hannah and Penninah. Hannah was childless and she endured endless taunts about it year after year. Elkanah, it seems, did nothing to intervene, merely indicating his greater love for Hannah by giving her more food. Rather than address the problem, he exacerbated it by his obvious favouring of one wife over the other. Hannah dealt with it by persistently taking the problem to God. She pleaded for a child and God answered her prayer. Even after Samuel was born, his father failed to act as the head of his house, telling Hannah to 'do what seems best' when she decided not to take Samuel to the temple to worship when he was a baby. She suffered in silence for years, but God honoured her suffering by giving her not only Samuel, but also other children, too. Create a modern context for Hannah's story. What can students learn from Hannah?

Nehemiah's story is a great example of assertiveness in the face of bullying. Nehemiah was a Jew, living in exile in Persia. He had been successful, rising to the position of the King's cupbearer. He faced plenty of bullying when he returned to his native country to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem. Two city officials, Sanballat and Tobia, weren't very happy about this. Knowing that he would face opposition, Nehemiah surveyed the walls at night (Nehemiah 2:10-12), to see what needed to be done, so keeping his work secret for as long as possible. Being circumspect can sometimes be the best way to avoid bullying.

Bullying began in earnest when the work started, with taunts and ridicule. Sanballat and Tobia accused Nehemiah of plotting against the King (Nehemiah 2:19-20). Instead of accepting the premise of their accusation, he chose instead to go to the root of their grievance. He pointed out that they had no historic claim to Jerusalem, so the rebuilding was basically none of their business. Next, the bullies made physical threats (Nehemiah 4:1-9). Nehemiah posted guards and kept on working. Some worked with tools in one hand and a

weapon in the other.

Then the bullies stepped up their game. They tried to entice Nehemiah to a meeting alone with them, so that they could kill him (Nehemiah 6:1-9). Seeing the plot, he refused to go. So they wrote a letter accusing him of trying to overthrow the King. He made two responses – he told them "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head", and he also prayed, asking God to strengthen his hands. The wall was rebuilt, and the honour of Jerusalem restored in record time, much to the disgust of the Sanballat and Tobia.

What might a modern context be for the story of Nehemiah? How did he deal with the bullying? What part does wisdom play when standing up to bullying?

8. Ofsted and the Equality Act 2010

The current Ofsted school inspection handbook requires schools to deal with HBT bullying. Inspectors are also required to consider how each school meets the needs of specific groups of pupils, including LGBT students or students from LGBT homes. Governors, school leaders and managers are required to, "promote all forms of equality and foster greater understanding of and respect for people of all faiths (and those of no faith), races, genders, ages, disability and sexual orientations (and other groups with protected characteristics), through their words, actions and influence within the school and more widely in the community." This requirement arises directly from Ofsted's interpretation of the Equality Act 2010.

A Christian approach to dealing with bullying is entirely consistent with this requirement, because it is based on the premise of complete equality at the very heart of human existence – the fact that we bear God's image. It doesn't judge, categorise or create hierarchies. It doesn't actively promote any one group within the community. It simply acknowledges that we each possess the stamp of God, but that we are also all sinners, in need of forgiveness and God's transformative love.

In order to categorise a school as outstanding, inspectors want to see leaders "promote equality of opportunity and diversity exceptionally well, for pupils and staff, so that the ethos and culture of the whole school prevents any form

of direct or indirect discriminatory behaviour. Leaders, staff and pupils do not tolerate prejudiced behaviour."

Safeguarding is also significant in categorisation. Here, inspectors are looking for a situation where "Leaders and managers have created a culture of vigilance where pupils' welfare is actively promoted. Pupils are listened to and feel safe. Staff are trained to identify when a pupil may be at risk of neglect, abuse or exploitation and they report their concerns."

Dealing with bullying is a serious, whole school issue. Creating the kind of culture and ethos for which Ofsted is looking requires the commitment of each and every person in the community to work together to create an environment that is safe, positive, supportive and encouraging. A biblically based approach can and should achieve exactly that.

Appendix A: Indicators of bullying

Many young people don't want to talk about being bullied. This may be because they feel ashamed or feel that they in some way deserve what is happening to them. Many fear that if they speak out or report being bullied, the bullying will get worse. There are signs that might indicate that a young person is being bullied. These may include:

- School avoidance, truancy or school phobia
- Unexplained, non-specific illness such as stomach aches, vomiting or headaches
- Reluctance to travel to and/or from school on public transport or on foot
- Changes in the normal travel routine, such as changing times or routes to school
- Running away from school during the day
- Sudden deterioration in academic work which the school cannot explain
- Unusual anxiety or an unexpected loss of self-confidence, becoming withdrawn

- Wanting to spend unusual amounts of time isolated from friends
- Inexplicably tearful or distressed
- Self-harm, threats of self-harm or suicide
- Eating disorders – skipping meals or binge eating
- Sleep disturbance, sleeplessness, nightmares, lethargy or excessive tiredness
- Damage to, or loss of clothing, possessions or school work
- Physical injury such as unusual bruising or scratches
- Stealing money
- Abuse of alcohol or taking drugs
- Seeming frozen, or unable to make decisions
- Taking unnecessary risks
- Appearing anxious about going online
- Noticeably distressed by texts, emails or social media posts
- Appearing to be acting out bullying behaviour on a younger sibling
- Aggressive, violent, insolent or intractable behaviour, uncharacteristic bad attitude
- Refusal to discuss any of the above, or the offering of implausible explanations

Appendix B: Sample policy

Rationale

We believe that all members of our community should feel respected and valued in a safe and secure environment. We celebrate the cultural diversity of every member of our school and seek to build a cohesive community by creating an environment to which each individual makes a contribution, acknowledging that every student is uniquely created in the image of God.

Aims

- To foster an ethos of respect for every individual
- To support students in making positive choices, helping them to develop self-control and self-confidence in their interaction with those around them
- To cultivate an awareness of the nature of bullying, its impact and how to deal with it
- To encourage the growth of godly character

Objectives

We will achieve a positive ethos within our community by:

- Demonstrating mutual respect and tolerance
- Creating a safe environment in which each person can flourish, becoming the person God created them to be
- Challenging and engaging with bullying behaviour
- Maintaining high expectations

Staff will:

- Report and record all incidents of bullying in line with agreed protocols
- Provide students with positive role models
- Maintain training to deal with bullying and the building of strong, effective relationships within the school community
- Acknowledge the uniqueness and dignity of each student as created in the image of God
- Use assemblies and other opportunities to nurture a strong, supportive community in which everyone is valued

Students will:

- Speak out when they witness bullying
- Treat others as they wish to be treated themselves, contributing to the creation of a culture of mutual respect and courtesy
- Accept responsibility for their own actions and choices, including making reparation where damage has been done

Bullying is a growing problem in many of our schools. Although a range of government strategies have attempted to address the issue, nothing has been done about dealing with the root of the problem – the heart of the individual.

This short booklet will help you understand what the Bible has to say about how positive transformation – in both bullies and the bullied – can be achieved.

Christian Concern provides a series of booklets, helping Christians understand and live out their calling to be salt and light to the world.

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