

## Defining Bullying

The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) defines bullying as the repeated use of power by one or more persons intentionally to harm, hurt or adversely affect the rights and needs of another or others.

***NIABF recommends that each school actively seeks a full and shared understanding of the meanings of key words among all its school community members, as understanding bullying and the different forms it can take is the starting point for tackling bullying effectively.***

The term bullying refers to a range of harmful behaviour, both physical and psychological. All bullying behaviour usually has the following four features:

1. It is repetitive and persistent – though sometimes a single incident can have precisely the same impact as persistent behaviour over time. This is as a result of it being experienced as part of a continuous pattern and can be extremely threatening and intimidating, which is particularly the case with racist bullying.
2. It is intentionally harmful – though occasionally the distress it causes is not consciously intended by all of those who are responsible or play a bystander role.
3. It involves an imbalance of power, leaving someone feeling helpless to prevent it or put a stop to it.
4. It causes feelings of distress, fear, loneliness and lack of confidence in those who are at the receiving end.

Common characteristics include the following points:

- A large part of the motivation is to demonstrate power by creating fear and to gain a sense of being 'respected' by peers
- It often happens that young people who engage in bullying have themselves been bullied in the past. They may feel powerless in their current circumstances and therefore compensate for this by intimidating, or trying to intimidate, others
- Bullying can be painfully obvious, but also can be subtle, discreetly hidden and difficult to prove
- Boys more often use direct physical bullying and threats of physical bullying, whereas exclusion from friendship groups is more common among girls. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in violence amongst girls
- Bullying can be instigated by an individual, one-on-one, or by a group on one individual or by a group on another group
- Bystanders often show tacit acceptance or approval, and in consequence people at the receiving end see them as part of what they are up against
- Bullying within a school is sometimes directly related to, and a consequence of, tensions and feuds within and between groups, families and communities in the local neighbourhood

Bullying can take many forms, including name-calling, taunting, mocking, and making offensive personal comments; threatening and intimidating; creating situations in which someone is humiliated, or made to look ridiculous, or gets into trouble; playing tricks and pranks; spitting, kicking and hitting; pushing and jostling, and 'accidentally' bumping into someone; hiding, damaging or taking belongings; sending malicious text messages, emails and photographs; leaving people out of groups or games or social occasions; and spreading hurtful and untrue rumours. Several of these behaviours plainly involve the use of words. Several, however, equally plainly, may be non-verbal, involving body language, gesture and facial expression. Non-verbal behaviours can be just as hurtful and intimidating as those that involve abusive language.

In a recent exercise asking primary aged pupils in Northern Ireland to describe bullying, the majority began by highlighting the feelings associated with being bullied. When parents took part in consultation workshops, they too initially focussed on feelings and moved on to describe behaviours. Therefore, whatever form bullying takes, NIABF strongly stresses the need for schools to focus first and foremost on the distress caused to those who are at the receiving end.

### Labels

**NIABF is keen to support schools avoiding labelling individual children and recommends *describing situations*, e.g. 'a bullying incident was reported on 20/11/07 where Joe Smith is alleged to have displayed racist bullying behaviours towards Guvinder Singh.' Suggest you come up with a name that more clearly suggests racist bullying – this is a bit subtle – or change racist to something else?**

Labels are generally negative in their depiction of deficits and more frequently than not the labels become the defining characteristic of the person, ignoring other aspects of his or her complex character.

### 'Victims'

In addition to the term *bully* the term *victim* is problematic – in that it can mean different things to different people, and can involve assumptions that are worth critical examination and reflection.

The term *victim* usually has connotations of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, as for example in phrases such as *victim in a road accident*. Often people speak of 'falling' victim, to stress the idea of misfortune and chance. The word implies too that action to right the wrong that has been suffered has to be undertaken by people other than the person who has been injured – the emergency services, for example, or by doctors and nurses.

The word is appropriate in connection with bullying in so far as its use is a reminder that people at the receiving end are in no way responsible for the incidents they experience; that bullying exists independently of whether specific individuals are directly hurt by it; and that schools and other public services have duties to intervene when incidents arise.

The term *victim* is unhelpful, however, in so far as it implies that the person who has been hurt is powerless and does not even need to be informed, let alone consulted, about action to redress the wrong that has been done – unhelpful and indeed harmful, that is to say, if the person is dehumanised and seen as merely passive, reduced to a mere statistic. If the wronged person feels those in authority treat them impersonally, and as though they have no capacity to take action of their own, their sense of being worthless and excluded, caused by the original incident, may be reinforced.

As highlighted previously, bullying causes feelings of distress, fear, loneliness and lack of confidence in those who are at the receiving end. Because of the disadvantages and dangers attached to the term *victim*, NIABF recommends schools do not use it when referring to those involved in a bullying incident. **NIABF recommends schools use the term ‘*child who has been bullied*’.** NIABF recognises however that within certain channels the word *victim* will continue to be used, such as the PSNI recording a racist Hate Crime incident.

#### Perpetrators

Following on from the term *victim* is the term *perpetrator*, which generally refers to a person who has committed a wrongdoing to a person or a group of people. Again, this word would traditionally tend to be used frequently within a criminal justice system.

**NIABF strongly recommend schools refer to the individual as the ‘*child who displayed bullying behaviour*’.**