

Bullying and teasing and children with ASD: what can we do?

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Editorial comment

Bullying and teasing at school is one of the most frequently expressed concerns by pupils with ASD and their parents and can lead to anxiety, depression and school refusal. It is therefore essential that ways to address this are developed and implemented. Annie Etherington is an Advisory Teacher in a London borough and has described what was done in a mainstream secondary school to provide social support to a boy with Asperger syndrome to reduce the incidence of bullying and teasing. This is a very practical paper which shows how collaboration between staff, the parents, the child and other pupils can lead to a carefully planned programme which increases the social awareness of all those involved and leads to a reduction in bullying.

Note: A decision has been made to refer to ASD as ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) in this borough and so ASC is used within this paper when referring to the work of the author. ASD is used when this is referred to in the literature.

Introduction

A frequent feature of the autobiographical accounts written by individuals with an Autism Spectrum Condition is a reference to their experiences of bullying, particularly in adolescence. These range from the mild:

'Bullying was sometimes a problem for me because I was different and a loner. Some of the children would call me names or tease me for not having any friends.'

(Tammet, 2006, p. 78)

to the more extreme:

'I got hanged (with wire around the neck) and other kinds of what the staff called mild teasing.... Things for me were somewhat more than the teasing issues..it was torture and abuse.'

(David A., cited in Sainsbury, 2000, p. 73)

Luke Jackson (2002), in his first hand account: *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*, devotes a chapter to the theme of bullying. He details systematic and persistent bullying throughout his school career and lists his distressing experiences of both physical and psychological incidents. He notes the well-intentioned but largely ineffectual interventions by some of his teachers. Similarly, Marc Fleisher (2003) describes the name calling and incidents of physical assault from his adolescence which impacted on his emotional well-being and has left a legacy of anxiety in relation to physical violence.

This paper will describe an intervention that was devised in response to the persistent bullying of one particular adolescent boy with Asperger syndrome and the subsequent and ongoing development of that intervention. The author is a Senior Advisory Teacher for pupils with Autism Spectrum Conditions in a borough of north London.

The Advisory team visits mainstream schools to support the inclusion of pupils with a diagnosis of Autism or Asperger syndrome. This role necessarily encompasses not only academic inclusion but also addresses the social-emotional curriculum, the development of social understanding and social inclusion. In the development of any intervention or programme of support, close liaison and collaboration with school staff and parents is critical. In this case, the parents were most supportive of our endeavours and the programme itself was the result of the combined ideas and efforts of the school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and the Advisory Teacher.

One of the schools supported by the author is a large comprehensive secondary school. The school has a mixed population of over 1,200 pupils including a large sixth form of nearly 200 students. The pupil population is culturally diverse, multi-faith and multi-lingual with more than half the pupils having English as an additional language (a proportion that is very high). The SENCo and his team of specialist teachers and specialist teaching assistants support a number of students who have been diagnosed with an ASD. One student in particular, referred to here as David, was causing some considerable concern three years ago. David had moved to the school at the beginning of Year 8, when he was 12 years old. David has Asperger syndrome and has cognitive abilities within the average range. Described in his Statement of Special Educational Needs as a conscientious, sensitive and timid boy, he found the move to a new school challenging but appeared to manage the transition quite well. However, within two months of the move there were some emerging concerns about David's social inclusion and some early indicators of bullying. The school has a robust anti-bullying policy with clearly defined reporting protocols with a stated ethos:

'Bullying behaviour operates through a climate of fear, threatens the safety, happiness and educational progress of pupils affected by it and will not be tolerated'.

(School anti-bullying policy statement)

An incident was reported (by David's mother) and the school staff followed the stated procedure. This was successful in that the two pupils involved with this incident did not engage in similar behaviour towards David again. However, as the year progressed, there was an increasing number of unpleasant interactions directed towards David. A feature that was common to many of these approaches was the exploitation of David's social naivety. He was encouraged to engage in inappropriate behaviours at the direction of some of his peers. This often took the form of the exaggeration of existing behaviours and then drawing general attention to these. One incident resulted in David's exclusion from school for a brief period. As these incidents began to increase, despite the best efforts of the school staff, David became increasingly distressed and very anxious about attending school. It was clear that whilst the existing anti-bullying policy was being implemented, this was not impacting on the levels and frequency of the bullying and this, in turn, was having an escalating, detrimental effect on David's well-being.

In discussion with David's parents, the SENCo and David's Head of Year, it was agreed that we should move beyond the anti-bullying procedures to devise an intervention that would target and eliminate the bullying. The SENCo felt strongly that as this was a peer-generated issue, it would require a peer related solution. Circle of Friends (Newton and Wilson, 2003) was an approach that was familiar to both the Advisory Teacher and the SENCo. It is an effective intervention that the Advisory Teacher had used over a number of years in primary school settings and, less frequently, in secondary schools. However, on this occasion, the structure of a Circle and the nature of the recruitment of volunteers and the subsequent development of a support network did not fit with the model we wished to create. Elements of the structure of a Circle of Friends are evident in the intervention implemented but there are a number of new features which were additional to or radically different from a conventional Circle.

After some debate it was agreed that there was a number of elements we wished to include:

- Rather than volunteers, staff would recruit the peer supporters. The SENCo, in particular, felt it was essential that some of the key perpetrators of the bullying incidents should be involved in the peer support programme
- Peer supporters would not be required to give up their own time but would be involved in the training programme during lesson time. Where possible this, was planned to coincide with Personal Social and Health Education lessons (PSHE)
- Peer supporters would be given training in support techniques, target setting and mentoring (provided by the SENCo)
- Peer supporters would be given training in understanding Asperger Syndrome (provided by the Advisory Teacher)
- The support package would not start until the supporters had completed their training
- It was anticipated that the training sessions would take place on a weekly basis over a period of about 5/6 weeks.
- We would restrict the number of supporters to 6
- Acknowledgment, appreciation and feedback to the supporters would be built into the programme
- David would be consulted and kept informed of the programme as it progressed.

The programme

Selection of peer supporters

Rather than recruiting volunteers, individuals were approached and asked to participate in the programme by the SENCo. The six young people concerned were all in the same year group as David but not necessarily the same tutor group. The SENCo recruited the two boys who had been involved in a significant number of incidents in relation to David. He also invited two boys who were both facing possible exclusion arising from their generally disaffected behaviour. Both had a diagnosis of dyslexia and were struggling with some aspects of the curriculum. Also included in the group were two girls who had already demonstrated some concern towards David and were generally supportive of him.

The training

Sessions were planned to start during the new academic year in September 2003. Held on a weekly basis for an hour each week, the following objectives and teaching content were to be addressed:

Week one:

Objectives: to identify own strengths and areas of need; to practice target setting.

Key teaching points for the session were linked to the importance of honesty in this process, exploring what is meant by empathy, elements critical to effecting change.

Activities included listing own strengths and needs; writing down the strengths of the other group members and comparing with their own list; choosing 3 personal targets for improvement and identifying steps towards that improvement.

Week two:

Objectives: to devise a personal action plan; to set a target for another group member.

Key teaching points were: importance of honesty with each other, identifying areas for support, acknowledging the need for support. Activities included writing a target action plan; completing mind maps with targets and suggestions, visualising the last difficult situation experience and devising an appropriate response; taking a monitoring sheet for own target to fill in.

Week three:

Objectives: to identify key areas of strength and need for the person with Asperger syndrome; to identify key areas of strength and need for David

Key teaching points were: emphasis on celebrating difference; acknowledgement of positive images of Autism/Asperger syndrome; acknowledgement of the important role to be taken by peer supporters. Activities included an interactive presentation on the triad of impairments and sensory issues and linking these points to identified areas of strength and need for David. The video 'A is for Autism' was watched and discussed.

Week four:

Objectives: to identify key social skills and analyse their usefulness; to identify potential difficulties in socialising for the individual with an Autism Spectrum Condition.

Key teaching points were: recognising social skills in action and the impact of relating to someone with limited, conventional social skills; recognising facial expression, tone of voice, posture and so on. Activities included social skills games including exploring personal space and facial expression and identifying key issues for David.

Week five:

Objectives: to identify key strategies and approaches to support David.

Key teaching points were linked to the importance and skill of listening in a non-judgemental way, communicating clearly and unambiguously, modelling and supporting appropriate social skills. Activities included: watching a clip from Luke Jackson's video diary, generating a list of ideas for support strategies, identifying helpful and unhelpful social approaches

Week six:

Objectives: the purpose of the final session was to provide an opportunity to address any issues arising for the peer supporters and for David to attend part of the meeting.

In the event, time was given to some important information on Child Protection issues and the peer supporters were given guidelines on the procedures they would need to follow if there were any concerns in this area. There was also a clarification about the limits of their role and when they should enlist the support or intervention of an adult. David attended part of the meeting and the supporters outlined the initial plan for support.

Initial implementation of the programme

In consultation with David, the initial plan was to provide support during all breaktimes as these had been the times when most of the bullying incidents had occurred. However, in drawing up their plan, the supporters had been sensitive to the fact that David sometimes liked to be on his own during the breaks. It was decided, therefore, to offer support and/or companionship which David could then either opt into or decline as he wished. The school grounds are extensive, including fields and a number of outdoor playground areas. A particular place in a quadrangle area close to the main building was selected as a meeting point (particularly chosen as one of David's favoured areas during breaks). The supporters set up a

rota and took it in turns to be 'on call' each break. At the beginning of each break the 'on call' supporters would go to the meeting point and wait for a few minutes. If David did not come they would assume that he did not want company for that break and would leave. However, they would check at intervals through the break that David had not come to the meeting point. If David did come, supporters would spend time with him there or invite him to join with their activities during the break. In addition, David often elected to eat his packed lunch in the quadrangle area. However, it was also agreed by the supporters that, should he choose to eat in the hall, he could join any of his supporters.

Development of the programme

The initial implementation of the programme was very successful. There was a significant and immediate reduction in bullying incidents and David reported that he felt happier at school. In discussion with his supporters, he identified other socially difficult times. These included not being picked for teams in P.E. and never being actively chosen as a partner for paired work. It was agreed by his supporters that those who shared lessons with David would choose him as a partner and select him as a team mate. This was a significant development for David and he particularly valued this intervention by his supporters.

As the programme became a routine part of David's school day, he initiated increasing contact with his supporters. Over time this took the form of social mentoring where David would check whether an action was socially appropriate. This led to a reduction in some of David's inadvertently inappropriate behaviours. He would also seek advice from his supporters about approaches from other students. Guidance from his supporters circumvented potential bullying incidents.

Expansion of the programme

After the very focused work with the six peer supporters, the SENCo was interested in extending aspects of the training to the whole year group. This was to be part of a larger package looking at a number of areas of special educational need. The Advisory Teacher devised a six part programme to be delivered by form tutors during PSHE lessons. Each lesson lasted for an hour. A PowerPoint presentation was developed covering the following areas:

Session One: Celebrating difference

The first session offered extensive opportunities for the students to explore differences on a personal level. A series of activities were prepared to enable them to assess their personal differences in interests, learning styles, processing of information, and practical engagement. By the end of the session, students would have a completed personal inventory booklet. An extension exercise involved a small group activity to conduct research into an individual whose 'difference' from others had either been the basis of their achievement or had not stood in their way (eg, Stephen Hawking)

Session Two: Autism and Asperger syndrome: a world of difference

The second session was based on the presentation used in the peer supporters' training on Autism Spectrum Conditions. Using first hand accounts to illustrate, this session identifies the important characteristics of Autism /Asperger syndrome.

Session Three: Autism and Asperger syndrome: the famous face

The purpose of the session was twofold: to reflect on famous people in history and in our current experience who have contributed significantly to the world and may be on the spectrum and to consider the accuracy and usefulness of media and fictional representations of Autism and Asperger syndrome.

Session Four: Perspectives from the world of Autism and Asperger syndrome

The fourth session uses a series of first hand accounts (text and film excerpts) as a starting point for reflecting on the issues facing the young person with an Autism Spectrum Condition and to compare them with their own.

Session Five: Exploring the social world

In the fifth session, students return to a more self-reflective mode and critically analyse the nature of friendships and the skills that are necessary for a friendship to prosper. Students complete an activity to look at relationships in their own lives including a 'circle of relationships' (from Circle of Friends).

Session Six: Taking action

The final session was left open so themes could be developed, as appropriate. However, ideas included a presentation from David himself and also from members of his peer support group. Students could also be invited to identify ways in which they could include/support a fellow student with an Autism Spectrum Condition.

Although this part of the programme was not implemented in David's school (due to logistical difficulties) it may be used there in the future and has been implemented in another local secondary school as part of their development of a peer support training package. In this instance the focus student also engaged in the training programme and delivered a presentation to the group at the end of the training period.

Discussion

The programme was developed in response to concern over an increasing number of bullying incidents. An immediate effect was a reduction in the number of reported incidents which coincided with the initial training sessions. Since the implementation of the programme, the bullying has significantly decreased with no major incidents since the peer support group became active in late 2003. According to David, the only issues have been 'a few insults' and some very occasional name calling. These have been reported to his peer supporters and the SENCo. David reports that he is happy at school and feels that the peer support group has been very effective. This impacted on David's view of himself and his attitude towards school:

'Now I've got my peer supporters I don't feel alone anymore. I don't keep thinking I'm going to get into trouble or do the wrong thing. I'm not frightened or anxious about coming to school anymore'.

(David, 2004)

Given the constraints imposed by the development of the programme as a naturalistic response to a pressing situation, it would be unwise, perhaps, to draw any conclusions, but it may be possible to hypothesise on which were, potentially, the critical elements.

The presence of two of the young people originally involved in some of the bullying incidents may have been pivotal on a number of levels. Logically, their involvement in the peer support group would impact on the number of incidents of bullying, however, there was a generalised reduction as well. Whilst they were not the only pupils involved in bullying in relation to David, they were well regarded by many of their peers and enjoyed some notoriety amongst their year group. Their inclusion in the group may have had the effect of positively influencing the behaviour of others. This may relate to some degree to the findings of Sasso and Rude (1987) which suggest that the inclusion of a 'high-status' peer buddy can influence the behaviour of other, low-status peers. In addition, it is likely that other potential bullies may have decided against any action against David because they knew of the involvement of the two boys in question and would wish to avoid any possible conflict.

The training sessions provided all the peer supporters with information and led to some understanding of the impact of Asperger syndrome on aspects of interaction, learning and behaviour. Some peer support interventions include information and training on Autism Spectrum Conditions (Roeyers, 1995; Mastralengo,

2005) whilst others focus on the skills the peer supporters will need (Harrel, Kamps and Kravits, 1997; Whitaker, 2004). The peer supporters valued the training as a way of understanding David, as can be seen by the following comments made by two of the boys involved:

'By knowing what a person's thinking or how they react to things, it helped us realise what it's about – how he's a bit different to everyone else and how he might react to things.'

'I think one of the key words was empathy and (understanding) how David responds to people's comments and the way he acts differently around different people. Now he knows what he can say around teachers and adults and when he needs to keep it to himself.'

(Two of the peer supporters, 2004)

There was a notable change in the approaches made to David by all the boys in the group. Particularly significant was a shift from perceiving David's actions as intentionally provocative or inappropriate and, instead understanding them as part of his difficulty with social understanding and social appropriateness. Once this was appreciated the boys, in particular, appeared to become less angry and more sympathetic towards David. One commented:

'He may say some odd things at times but he's still a human being, a person who's got feelings.'

(Peer supporter, 2004)

Both girls had always been more positive in their approaches to David but felt that the training had helped them to become more skilled in terms of their communication with him:

'He was actually more open and talked about things he didn't before. He talked about daily things, what's on the news and things like that.'

(Peer supporter, 2004)

The training sessions also provided opportunities to develop some general support skills related to social interaction, target setting and peer mentoring. The peer supporters felt these were helpful and one of the girls commented:

'We basically started learning about ourselves...what things we had problems with and we could improve if we set targets for ourselves. That helped us to develop our knowledge.'

(Peer supporter, 2004)

Additional features which may have been significant in the success of the project were the built in and exploited incidental opportunities for feedback and celebration with the peer supporters. This was considered to be an important element given the potential difficulties in maintaining the enthusiasm and interest of peer supporters of children with an Autism Spectrum Condition as found by Lord, 1984. From the outset much emphasis had been placed on the importance of the project and the fact that it was the first time such a programme had been implemented in the authority. The group were asked for their agreement to filming their discussions about the project for use in other training. They were asked if they would be prepared to contribute to training sessions for teachers. The peer supporters were all willing to participate in this way. A group appraisal of the project was filmed by the Advisory Teacher in 2004. In September 2005 most of the peer supporters and David made a presentation about the group at a conference to an audience of over 150 school staff. In addition, the SENCo held regular meetings with the group to discuss the programme, feedback continuing success and troubleshoot any issues. Most importantly, the peer supporters were themselves proud of what they had achieved:

'When he was told that we were the group that was going to help him, he started trusting us and telling us things. We weren't his enemies or going to boss him about, we were just there for him.'

'Before we started this programme he was on his own a lot but now he knows that we're there for him at break time and lunch time. He know when to come up to us and talk to us.'

'In lessons it's alright because he can talk to me now. Before he just used to be on his own and not able to be with anyone. Say in group activities, everyone would get picked and he wouldn't get picked. Now if doesn't get picked, I'd go with him. We can do our thing and, at the end, we've had a good lesson and he's had someone to be with. He's not with no-one, that must be boring for him. I know what it must feel like – on your own, if you've got no friends.'

(Three peer supporters, 2004)

This was further encouraged by David's clear appreciation of the project. Any favourable comments he made were either feedback to the group or David was encouraged to tell his supporters himself. The project had an immediate and then ongoing impact on David:

'I feel safe to come to the school now. My supporters are there for me and I can go to them if I need help or if I need to talk about something.'

(David, 2005)

As a result of the effectiveness of the project, subsequent peer groups have been trained in each of the following year groups. The training has taken place during the first year in the school and has been modelled on the programme developed for the original peer support group. There have been some interesting features in some of the subsequent cohorts which have added to our understanding of elements that may be helpful and those that may not. The second cohort was larger (12 pupils were trained) but were particularly focused on supporting two named individuals. An interesting feature of this group was that the students had all volunteered (rather than being recruited) and two of the group were the younger siblings of two older brothers with an Autism Spectrum Condition. The two siblings contributed powerfully to the group in terms of their personal experiences of Autism and Asperger syndrome and in bringing information texts for the other group members to borrow. Their presence was highly valued by the other group members who accorded them respect as evident specialists in their knowledge and understanding. The third cohort was slightly less successful, at least initially. This was a much larger group of volunteers (over 20) and at the time of starting the training they did not have a specific, named individual that they would be supporting. Follow-up training in smaller groups was put into place to address these issues. It indicates that the size of the group needs to be kept small (between 6 – 12) and that the training benefits from being specifically linked to a named and known individual. Given the nature and content of the training it is, therefore, imperative that parents have knowledge of, and have agreed to, the training programme and that the individual concerned has also been consulted and permission gained.

Interest in the project has been expressed by some of the other secondary schools in the area. A similar peer support programme was implemented in another large comprehensive school, this time focused on a 16 year old boy with Asperger syndrome. The issues there were slightly more complex in that the focus student had also been the perpetrator of, as well as victim to, some bullying. However, the key issue was that he had inadvertently alienated many of his peers by his manner and felt isolated and 'desperate for a friend'. The programme has been adapted to use the 'Celebrating Difference' package described above as it was felt that it would be very important for his supporters to have a solid understanding of Asperger syndrome as a starting point for supporting this particular pupil.

Finally, a decision made in relation to the first programme was that the supporters would not have to give their own time for training and debriefing sessions and, instead, they would be released when possible from a linked lesson (such as PSHE). However, it became clear as the project progressed that the students were also benefiting from the undertaking in a number of ways. This is in line with findings from other, similar projects. Whitaker et al. (1998); Kamps et al. (1998) reported positive evaluations for children participating in buddy programmes (Circle of Friends and social skills groups respectively) for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. In reflecting on what they had gained from their participation in the peer support group, the supporters were all positive in their evaluations:

'I realise I can be really snappy; it's not intentional but a bit of stress and I snap. I learned to try and control it now because you snap at someone and realise, it's rude, I shouldn't have done it. It's just helped me realise myself that I need to try and relax a bit more.'

'I learned it's easier to help people than you thought. Say, if you have a friend with a problem and you think you don't really know what to do, just being there is actually going to help them, knowing that they have someone to turn to if they have a problem.'

'I've learned that I actually have patience.'

'Being patient with David has helped me to be more patient with my other friends. I don't really talk over them anymore, I just listen to them and that's what we've had to do with David.'

'It feels really good to be helping someone and that someone, at the end of the day, is going to appreciate what you've done for them. It's just for a little bit that you're taking time out from your school work and helping someone who needs you.'

'It makes me feel good knowing that I'm helping someone else.'

'It may take a bit of time to learn how to help them but it's really worth it in the end – they're happy and you're happy as well.'

(Peer supporters, 2004)

It seems only fitting that the last words should go to David:

'My peer supporters have really helped me. I can talk to them and they will help me to know if what I'm doing is appropriate. Sometimes I don't know if people are trying to be unkind to me but I can ask one of my support group and they can tell me. Once this girl asked me to stand on a bench and sing a song. I did it but I think she wanted to humiliate me. I asked one of my supporters. He said I shouldn't do what people tell me to do if it makes me feel bad inside. I should just say no and walk away. I think he is right. I think I can trust him.'

(David, 2006)

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