



## YCS Effective Practice Briefing: Girls and Bullying

*YCS Effective Practice Briefings are produced by the YCS Quality Development Team and are based on up to date evidence and engagement with children, staff and key stakeholders. They provide concise and easily accessible advice and guidance for front-line staff. They are not intended as a complete review of all evidence but an initial summary of helpful information and guidance.*

### 1. What is bullying and how can bullying amongst girls be identified?

Bullying creates and/or exploits an imbalance of power between individuals or groups. It is characterised by behaviour which is usually repetitive, intentionally harmful, and of an emotional, social and/or physical nature'.<sup>1</sup>

Typical features of bullying amongst girls include *gossiping and spreading rumours, making indirect comments or unkind jokes aimed at causing humiliation, being rude and hurting others feelings, getting other girls to act unkindly to potential victims, ostracizing girls from established groups and direct verbal assaults.*

### 2. How can I tell if a girl is being bullied?

Bullying can affect people differently, look out for ongoing changes in behaviour and mood. Girls experiencing bullying may lose confidence and feel bad about themselves. This could contribute to increasing levels of anxiety, depression and poor eating habits. Girls may also have increased difficulty sleeping and experience headaches or sickness and are also more likely to become isolated from groups and not feel able join in or talk when others are around.

### 3. How to address bullying with girls and restore peace.

#### Be a positive role model:

- Behave with integrity, be respectful in your interactions with others - even when they are being disrespectful to you - model pro-social behaviour and be positively assertive but non-aggressive when you need to be. Take responsibility for your actions.

#### Be pro-active:

- Let everyone who visits the establishment (children, staff and visitors) know bullying is not acceptable.
- Create opportunities for girls who may be being bullied to talk with someone they trust in a safe place.
- Swiftly and consistently challenging low level bullying to prevent things from escalating – this can also provide opportunities to generate wider conversations about bullying and its consequences.
- Encourage girls to report bullying and make sure instances are investigated.

#### Support both the perpetrator and the victim:

- Understand that those involved in bullying others have usually been victimised themselves and behaviours have been learnt as a mode of self-protection. It is therefore important to ensure perpetrators are not unnecessarily labelled or stigmatised as bullies.
- Help girls involved in bullying to understand that it includes anything a group or individual does to hurt another person and that this has a range of consequences, both for the bully and the victim. Encourage empathy by talking through how a bullying victim feels and how it may impact their life.
- Take a trauma informed approach by trying to understand why the bullying is happening and by identifying and addressing the causes.
- Put in place plans for both perpetrators and victims that provide support and address issues.
- If bullying is happening at particular places or times be particularly vigilant and consider increasing monitoring and supervision during those periods to reduce the opportunity to bully – prevention can be better than cure!
- Offer conflict resolution by trained staff where this can be helpful.
- Encourage and support girls to be themselves and to value their background and culture. Appropriately challenge attempts to undermine this.

## Girls in the Secure Estate

Girls make up a small proportion of the secure estate population and their numbers have been falling over time: The 190 girls in the estate in 2008/9 reduced to 26 in 2018/19. This represents a drop from 7% to 3% of the total population. Girls are accommodated in Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Secure Children's Homes (SCHs).

## Is Bullying Different in Secure Settings?

Whilst research in to the specifics of bullying is limited and mainly adult focused, evidence shows that the opportunity for bullying and aggression between residents can be increased due to the nature of Secure Environments. Models explaining prison bullying, such as the '*Multifactor Model of Bullying in Secure Settings*' (MMBSS: Ireland, 2012), highlight the impact of institutional hierarchies and how they can be based on informal dominance and power, with bullies at the top, victims at the bottom, and victims who will never fight back at the very bottom.<sup>1</sup>

## Is Bullying Different for Girls?

The Children in Custody Report 2017-18 notes that **80%** of girls reported having been victimised by their peers, compared to **24%** boys.

Because boys and girls bully differently, it's important to be able to identify those differences. Also, the longer bullying goes on the more severe the impact can be: It's vital to be aware and be able to respond as early as possible<sup>2</sup>.

Barnardo's research into bullying and girls suggests some key differences between males and females:

- Girls tend to be more [premeditated](#) in their actions while boys bullying tends to be more to [opportunistic](#). This can result in girls being subject to greater levels of psychological bullying which has involved planning.

- Boys are more likely to experience physical bullying as it is typically impulsive in nature.
- Girls can bully other girls indirectly and in more 'passive aggressive' ways, using relational aggression to [disguise](#) their bullying. Typical features of this behaviour include gossiping and spreading rumours, getting other girls to act unkindly to potential victims, ostracizing girls from established groups and direct verbal assaults.
- While both boys and girls form groups around a leader, girl groups tend to involve higher levels of competition and insecurities for girls in 'leadership' positions. Barnardo's found that in this context 'in clique bullying (bullying within groups) is not unusual'.<sup>3</sup>
- Girls may also be more likely to experience sexual bullying than boys, with rumours spreading around sexual activity regardless of the validity of the claims. They are also more likely to receive sexual messages and/or harassment from boys.
- Girls in YCS Secure Settings have also highlighted a number of bullying related behaviours including, whispering to leave someone out, playing jokes meant to humiliate others, isolating girls from groups, making indirect comments to further isolate individuals, being rude and deliberately hurting other girls' feelings and direct physical assaults.

## How to Tell if a Girl is Being Bullied:

Girls who are bullied may be at increased risk of internalising their responses. This can take the form of depression, anxiety, self-harm or withdrawal from peers or aspects of the regime. These symptoms can sometimes be more easily overlooked than the 'acting out' behaviour more typical of boys.<sup>4</sup>

Girls in YCS Secure Settings pointed out the powerful impact of being bullied saying that it

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<sup>1</sup> International Handbook of Forensic Psychology in Secure Settings 2017, Chapter 15 (Routledge: Edited by Ireland, J. L., Ireland, C. A., Gredecki, N., and Fisher, M).

<sup>2</sup> Girls Bullying Girls, Girlshealth.gov, (2014)

<sup>3</sup> The Complexity of Girls' Social Interactions and the Impact of Negative Peer Relationships. (Menna Thomas Development Officer Barnardo's Cymru April 2011)

<sup>4</sup> [Girls and bullying. Parents experiences.](#) (Parentline Plus, March 2006)

could change the victim's self-image. Girls who had experienced bullying said they found it difficult to believe positive things about themselves – especially about their looks. They described being a victim of bullying as 'devastating for their self-esteem'.

### **Understanding Girls Who Bully:**

Girls engaged in this kind of behaviour could be doing so because:

- They previously were, or are currently, being bullied or abused themselves and are modelling a learned set of behaviours that helps them achieve control.
- These behaviours provide them with a form of power, domination and attention and an avenue to take back control of their world.
- They are complying with a set of expectations and demands from peers in order to fit in and avoid being bullied themselves: It is important to be aware that girls can of be both victims and perpetrators at the same time and responses should take this in to account.

Reasons for bullying given by the girls from within the Secure Estate include: Looks, personality or jealousy of the victim, low self-esteem of the bully, for fun or out of boredom, to make someone feel horrible and you feel better, doing it to others to avoid it happening to you as it is an expected behaviour; 'it's all about reputations, freezing individuals out, excluding them from the social groups'.

Those who are seen as different, such as Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual Plus (LGBT +) and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children etc, may be more likely to be targeted by bullies.

### **Effective Practice in Addressing Bullying:**

Box 3 on the front page provides a range of suggestions for addressing bullying.

In the development of [Building Bridges Framework](#) children also raised concerns about this area and made suggestions about how it could be addressed. As a result, the Framework includes these new requirements (see Building Bridges 5.7):

*All staff must take a consistent and proactive approach to addressing bullying and violence. This should include:*

- *swiftly and consistently challenging low level bullying;*
- *investigating all instances of bullying and violence;*
- *both perpetrators and victims should have plans to provide support and address issues put in place and should be monitored for an appropriate period;*
- *responses to incidents should focus on identifying underlying causes;*
- *offering conflict resolution by trained staff.*

Jane Ireland's work also suggests that a strategic approach can make a difference. This includes:

- Taking a whole establishment approach which involves staff, children and visitors and reinforcing the approach with all new arrivals
- Measuring the problem by gathering information on how extensive it is, who is doing it and where it happens
- Reducing opportunities for bullying by managing the physical environment, increasing supervision when it is likely to take place and the use of CCTV
- Making sure support for victims is in place<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jane L. Ireland Bullying in Prisons, The Psychologist, March 2002