

# DEALING WITH BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: A CONSULTATION WITH CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

BY THE OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN'S OFFICE

- We can't solve Bullying unless people speak up. You can put a stop to bullying
- if we tell a teacher, parent or someone who can help.



**ombudsman**  
for children • do leanaí

# It's ok to be different

## STOP THE BULLYING.

LISTENING  
THE TALKER WHAT  
DID THEY SAY.  
TO THE CHILDREN

TO LEARN.



The good ways that children should be able to take part in making this plan is circle time, being open on your own opinion and discussing it with others. !!!

Meetings twice a week

- Staff
- Students are involved in the meetings
- Bring in inspectors to schools
- Teachers on Yard Duty to supervise break time

They should check at least once a week  
Students should be asked their opinions on



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# FOREWORD

As Ombudsman for Children, my overall role, and statutory responsibility, is to promote and monitor the rights and welfare of children under 18 living in Ireland. Among my obligations in this regard is to promote awareness of children's rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As the Preamble to the Convention clarifies, recognising and working towards the progressive realisation of children's rights is fundamentally about developing a culture in which, among other things, the inherent dignity and worth of every child is respected and children are supported to respect the principles of "peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity."

Since its establishment eight years ago, my Office has engaged directly with hundreds of schools across the country and heard from thousands of children, parents as well as professionals working in the education system. Through this work, we understand that schools occupy a vital place in the lives of children, their families and communities. We are aware of the significant roles that principals, teachers and other professionals working in schools play in children's and young people's lives and of the different ways in which schools are involved in promoting and protecting a range of children's rights on a daily basis. In this respect, it is worth noting my Office's experience that, while parents are the strongest and most tenacious advocates for children, there is also a wide network of professionals, including principals and teachers, who are willing to act and advocate on behalf of children, including children who are among the most vulnerable in our society. Indeed, the 2011 data relating to complaints dealt with by my Office shows that the most likely professional advocate for children is the school principal.

Among the challenges that professionals working in schools can encounter is the complex and evolving problem of bullying among children and young people. On average, over 40% of complaints made to my Office annually relate to education and bullying is consistently among the five issues raised most frequently in education-related complaints. Although my Office has no role to investigate or substantiate allegations of bullying, it has had occasion to consider the manner in which such matters are dealt with in and by schools. In a majority of cases, my Office encourages Boards of Management to resolve the issues arising through schools' local complaints procedures; where necessary, we independently and impartially examine the matter further in order to arrive at an understanding of the issues involved and, where appropriate, make recommendations as to how the matter may be resolved in the best interests of the child or children affected.

From considering complaints relating to bullying, we are aware of a range of issues that can inhibit schools' ability to handle incidents of bullying. Among these are the fact that bullying can often occur in places that are hidden from view and that, in some cases, its underlying causes can concern prejudicial attitudes such as homophobia that may not be openly discussed and challenged in schools. Furthermore, bullying can be symptomatic of factors arising in a child's life outside of school, including at home, in the community and in the wider society. Correspondingly, although schools certainly have an important role to play in the prevention of bullying and intervening when incidents of bullying arise, work to combat the phenomenon of bullying, and its underlying causes, needs to involve responsibilities being taken and shared appropriately across the education system; a whole school approach at school level needs to be supported by a system-wide response so that boards of management, principals, teaching and non-teaching staff, parents/carers and children themselves are assisted to play their part by, among others, those responsible for national education policy and guidance, monitoring and inspection of schools, professional development and training, and curriculum development.

This report presents the views and ideas shared by over three hundred children and young people who participated in a consultation by my Office on dealing with bullying in schools. The consultation was initiated in light of concerns about bullying that have been raised with my Office by children, parents and professionals and in accordance with my obligations under Section 7 of the Ombudsman for Children Act, 2002 to consult with children and to highlight issues relating to their rights and welfare that are of concern to children themselves.

The children and young people who took part in this consultation were facilitated by OCO staff to identify actions, which they feel could make a significant contribution to dealing effectively with bullying in schools. Taken together, the viewpoints shared by children and young people suggest, *inter alia*, that work with and by schools in this area could benefit from a two-strand approach comprising prevention and intervention strategies. One notable aspect of children's views was the emphasis placed on preventive work, in particular on initiatives dedicated to raising awareness of bullying as well as programmes focused on tackling the discriminatory attitudes that can give rise to bullying and developing children's appreciation of and respect for diversity. A further interesting message to emerge from the consultation workshops was the broadly shared view among children and young people that incidents of bullying will be most appropriately and effectively dealt with through restorative measures. In this and other areas for action which they discussed, children and young people consistently emphasised the importance of all students being facilitated to express their views and actively participate in measures to deal with bullying. As this report illustrates, they made a wide range of concrete and creative suggestions as regards how children and young people can be encouraged and supported to take an appropriate share of responsibility for addressing the problem of bullying and, as such, for building a culture of respect for the rights and dignity of every child.

In publishing this report, it is my hope that the views of children highlighted here and the corresponding recommendations made by my Office will inform decision-making about future measures that can strengthen existing work with and by schools to combat bullying.



Emily Logan

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Emily Logan,  
*Ombudsman for Children*



# DEVELOPING RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

- ① Don't exclude
- ② Treat people the way you want to be
- ③ Be fair

Never leave  
others out

Why treat one  
person different  
were all the  
same

It's OK To Be Different!



Workshops  
Students  
as teachers





# 1 • BACKGROUND TO THE CONSULTATION

## Statutory basis for the consultation

Emily Logan was appointed Ireland's first Ombudsman for Children in December 2003 and was reappointed for a second term in December 2009. Established under primary legislation, the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is the independent national human rights institution for children in Ireland and its overall statutory mandate is to promote and monitor the rights and welfare of children and young people under 18 years of age.

The Ombudsman for Children is accountable to the Oireachtas in relation to the exercise of her core statutory functions. Provided for in the 2002 Act, these functions include:

- examining and investigating complaints made by or on behalf of children in relation to the administrative actions, or inactions, of schools, hospitals and a range of other public bodies;
- monitoring and providing independent advice at Ministerial level on any matter relating to children's rights and welfare, including developments in legislation and public policy affecting children;
- promoting awareness among members of the public, including children, of matters relating to children's rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how children's rights can be enforced.

The OCO's consultation with children and young people on the subject of dealing with bullying in schools was undertaken in accordance with the Ombudsman for Children's positive obligations under Section 7 of the 2002 Act to:

- encourage public bodies to develop policies, practices and procedures designed to promote the rights and welfare of children;
- consult with children and highlight issues relating to their rights and welfare that are of concern to children themselves;
- collect and disseminate information on matters relating to the rights and welfare of children.

## Context for the consultation

It is estimated that there are at least 7,000 primary school and 3,700 post-primary school students who find it difficult to go to school every day as a result of being bullied frequently and that at least a further 24% of primary school students and 14% of post-primary school students have experienced bullying, albeit to a lesser extent.<sup>1</sup>

As has been outlined in the Ombudsman for Children's annual reports to the Houses of the Oireachtas, the issue of bullying in schools is consistently raised with the OCO by parents. A significant majority of the more than 6,000 complaints dealt with by the OCO since its establishment have been made by parents on behalf of their children. On average, over 40 % of complaints made to the Office annually relate to education and bullying is consistently among the five issues raised most frequently in education-related complaints. Although the OCO has no role to investigate or substantiate allegations of bullying, it has had occasion to consider the manner in which such matters are dealt with in and by schools. In such cases, the OCO's approach has been to promote the resolution of issues through local complaints procedures and, where necessary, to independently and impartially examine the matter further in order to arrive at an understanding of the issues involved and, where appropriate, make recommendations as regards how the matter might be resolved in the best interests of the child or children affected. From its consideration of complaints relating to bullying, the OCO is aware of a range of issues that can impede schools' capacity to handle incidents of bullying effectively. Among these issues are:

- Incidents of bullying can occur out of view of school staff (for example, in the toilets or school bus). Accordingly, there have been occasions where initial contact by the OCO with a school in relation to an issue concerning bullying is the first time the school has become aware of it.
- Bullying behaviours can be symptomatic of diverse factors in a child's life at home, in school, in his/her local community and/or in the wider society.<sup>2</sup> As such, while schools have an important role to play in addressing bullying, they cannot carry sole responsibility for doing so and, where the issues involved are complex, they cannot be expected to handle the matter without the involvement and support of others.
- There can be different – and divergent – views as regards the appropriate approach to dealing with specific incidents of bullying, including which policies and procedures to use and when, and the extent to and manner in which the children directly affected and their parents/carers should be involved in efforts to resolve the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Mona O'Moore, Speech to the Department of Education and Skills' Anti-Bullying Forum, 17th May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See O'Moore, M., *Understanding School Bullying: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010)

The issue of bullying is also raised regularly with the OCO by children. Every year hundreds of children and young people visit the OCO to take part in the Office's rights education programme. Through this programme, the OCO has an ongoing opportunity to hear and learn directly from children about their experiences and about issues that are important to them, including issues relating to their education and arising in schools. From this work, it is evident that bullying is matter of considerable concern to children and young people of different ages, living in different parts of the country and in diverse circumstances. Furthermore, through this and other direct work with children, including targeted initiatives to engage directly with vulnerable groups of young people, the OCO is aware that the related issue of stereotyping and stigma, and young people's experiences or fears that one or more aspects of their identity or circumstances has led or could lead to bullying by their peers, can be a significant concern for young people and, in some cases, a very considerable burden which they carry.

In the context of Ireland's last examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child of its compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Ombudsman for Children raised concerns about bullying that have been brought to the OCO's attention. The UN Committee subsequently recommended that Ireland "ensure that necessary measures are taken to combat the phenomenon of bullying and that its consequences are dealt with in a responsive and child-sensitive manner".<sup>3</sup>

In its 2009 General Comment on children's right to be heard, the UN Committee identifies one key feature of a child-sensitive approach to dealing with bullying, namely: facilitating the active participation of children themselves in measures to address the issue.<sup>4</sup> As this report highlights, children and young people who participated in the OCO's consultation on dealing with bullying in schools shared the view that children should have meaningful opportunities to express their views on and play an active role in a range of actions, which they considered necessary to both prevent and deal with bullying: schools having an effective anti-bullying policy; raising awareness and understanding of bullying, including the harm it can cause; delivering education programmes and initiatives that promote respect for diversity; assisting children to speak up about bullying; and using restorative measures that support victims and perpetrators of bullying to resolve their differences.

From its direct engagement with schools across the country, the OCO is aware of and appreciates the significant roles that principals and teachers play in children's and young people's lives and of the different ways in which schools can be and are involved in promoting and protecting a wide range of children's rights on a daily basis. Indeed the OCO has come across examples of innovative measures being employed by schools to

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<sup>3</sup> CRC/C/IRL/CO/2, para. 59(c).

<sup>4</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009): *The right of the child to be heard*, para. 109.

prevent bullying and, when it does arise, to deal with it in a restorative way. As such, deliberations on how schools can be further supported to deal with bullying and its consequences might usefully consider how schools can be facilitated to share information and learning with one another on an ongoing basis.

Expressing concern about the incidence of homophobic and transphobic bullying across schools in Europe, the Council of Europe's former Commissioner for Human Rights has emphasised the importance of policy-makers and school management giving "strong support" to teachers so that they have "the means and resources to create a healthy and inclusive environment in schools and classrooms."<sup>5</sup> His observations can be seen to underscore the importance of responsibilities being taken and shared appropriately across the education system, from the level of public policy and administration through to day-to-day practice in the classroom in order to mainstream a culture of inclusion, equality and respect for diversity and, with that, to combat the phenomenon of bullying, including homophobic and transphobic bullying, among children and young people.

The OCO is aware that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has implemented a range of measures during the last twenty years aimed at preventing and combating bullying. These include: the development of guidance and resources for schools such as the DES Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary Schools (1993) and the NEWB Guidelines for Schools on developing Codes of Behaviour (2008); the creation of opportunities to address the issue of bullying with children and young people in the context of curriculum teaching and learning through subjects like SPHE, CSPE and RSE; the establishment of a role for the DES Inspectorate to advise and evaluate schools' anti-bullying measures through Whole School Evaluations and SPHE subject inspections; and work by the SPHE Support Service to support teachers and schools to educate children and young people about the issue of bullying and to address the issue of bullying on a whole school basis.

Notwithstanding these and other initiatives, it is evident that bullying is a persistent problem, which continues to evolve and that dealing with it effectively remains a considerable and complex challenge. In May 2012, the Minister for Education and Skills held a Forum to explore ways to tackle bullying, and in particular homophobic bullying, in schools. In addition, the Minister established a Working Group to examine how existing work to combat bullying in schools might be strengthened. In July, the Ombudsman for Children met with the Working Group to bring to its attention matters relating to schools' handling of bullying that have been raised with the OCO.

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5 Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Schools must stop spreading homophobic and transphobic messages', September 2011, at <http://commissioner.cws.coe.int/>

The OCO's experience of engaging with this issue suggests that future initiatives focused on strengthening schools' capacity to deal with bullying need to be underpinned by a whole school approach that is:

- inclusive of *all* members of the school community;
- supported by the education system as a whole (through policy, guidance, monitoring and inspection, training, and educational materials for curriculum teaching and learning); *and*
- reinforced by wider community/societal initiatives that combat discriminatory attitudes and promote a culture of respect for human rights.

## Overall aim and objectives of the consultation

The overall aim of the OCO's consultation was to hear children's and young people's views and ideas about what actions are needed to deal effectively with bullying in schools. In fulfilling this aim, the OCO worked to achieve the following objectives:

- to ensure that the OCO's understanding of the issue of bullying, as it arises in schools, is informed by the views and perspectives of children themselves;
- to highlight children's perspectives and ideas on what steps might usefully be taken to address bullying in schools;
- to facilitate due consideration of children's viewpoints and ideas by relevant stakeholders, including the Working Group established by the Minister for Education and Skills earlier in 2012 to examine how all forms of bullying, and in particular homophobic bullying, can best be tackled in schools.

## Focus of the consultation

Between September and December 2011, the OCO consulted ten groups of children and young people visiting the Office about schools' handling of bullying. Between June and September 2012, the OCO consulted a further nine groups of children and young people about how to deal effectively with bullying in schools. Altogether, over 300 children and young people between 10 and 17 years of age shared their views and ideas with the OCO. They included children and young people from Carlow, Dublin, Donegal, Limerick, Mayo, Monaghan and Wexford. Among the participants were young people in care, young people with physical disabilities and LGBT young people.



The consultations were solution-oriented; the workshops facilitated by OCO staff encouraged participating children and young people to focus their discussions on identifying approaches and actions, which they consider necessary, to deal effectively with bullying in schools.

Through these workshops, children and young people worked in small groups to share their views with one another and to highlight their main ideas and messages on a blank sheet of paper. They were encouraged to do this in whatever way suited them best – for example, by making a poster, compiling an action plan, drawing pictures to illustrate their ideas, or jotting down some key words. In conclusion to each consultation workshop, children and young people from each small group were asked to share their key ideas with the wider group. The viewpoints and ideas expressed by participants through their posters and through the concluding feedback session were collated and written up by OCO staff.

This report highlights the views and ideas of children and young people consulted by the OCO. In addition to summarising their viewpoints, the report documents a range of children's and young people's views and ideas directly, through a montage of their own words and images.

## 2 • FINDINGS OF THE CONSULTATION

There was consensus among participants in the OCO's consultation that bullying is a very important issue for children and young people. They shared the view that it is vital that both bullying and its causes are addressed, in particular because the consequences of bullying can be so damaging for children and young people affected by it.

Taken together, the views and ideas shared by children and young people as regards actions needed to deal with bullying can be clustered around two overarching themes: prevention and intervention. A notable aspect of the findings in this regard is that, although children and young people often chose to focus in on specific dimensions to the issue when working together in their small groups, the collated findings establish an even weighting between prevention and intervention strategies. As such, the overall findings suggest that work focused on tackling bullying in schools effectively should comprise a two-strand approach.

### Prevention Strategies

In terms of prevention strategies, children's and young people's ideas focused on two main areas for action: school planning, and awareness raising and education.

#### School Planning

Participants in most of the consultation workshops thought it essential that schools have "rules that make sure there is no bullying", i.e. a plan or policy in place for dealing with bullying. While levels of awareness among children and young people as regards their own schools' respective policies for dealing with bullying varied significantly, participants had clear views on what issues need to be addressed in schools' anti-bullying policies; who should be involved in developing a school's anti-bullying policy and monitoring its effectiveness; and how people should be made aware of a school's anti-bullying policy:

- While they did not speak in so many words about a 'whole school approach' by schools to developing their anti-bullying policies, children and young people were of the view that all members of the school community should have the opportunity to participate in developing their school's plan to deal with bullying. Principals, deputy principals, teachers, parents and students/pupils were named explicitly in this regard. Several groups of children and young people gave reasons for holding this view, including:

bullying is everyone's business and, as such, everyone in school should have an opportunity to input into the school's development of its anti-bullying policy; a whole school approach is a "fair" approach to take as any member of a school community could potentially be affected by bullying in one way or another (i.e. get bullied, witness bullying, be involved in bullying, have responsibility to deal with a bullying incident, etc.); the policy arising from such an approach is more likely to be effective and supported.

- Participants who discussed the issue of schools' having a policy were unanimous that children and young people must be afforded meaningful opportunities to participate in the development of their schools' anti-bullying policies. With reference to their own experiences, a number of young people suggested that, at present, students do not have enough, if any, input into their school's anti-bullying policy. Moreover, several participants were emphatic that schools need to be inclusive in their approach to involving students, suggesting that schools should not limit students' participation to engaging with children and young people sitting on student councils and pupil committees. Age-appropriate surveys, class discussions/debates and circle time were among the suggestions made as regards methodologies that schools might employ in the interests of taking an inclusive approach.
- Participants proposed that the following should be among the matters set out in schools' anti-bullying policies:
  - a statement of the school community's core values;
  - an express commitment by the school to dealing with bullying;
  - clear definitions of different types of bullying and bullying behaviours;
  - an outline of what steps the school will take to try to prevent bullying;
  - an outline of what steps will be taken and by whom when bullying occurs (roles and responsibilities), including information about how students will be supported to speak up if they are being bullied, witness bullying or are bullying, and who they can speak to;
  - what supports will be given to a young person who is a victim of bullying;
  - what the potential consequences are for those involved in bullying and what supports they will be given to help them address their bullying behaviours.

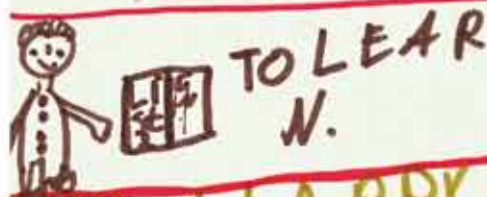
# SCHOOL PLAN TO DEAL WITH BULLYING

good ways to let children know the school plan on bullying are the teachers discussing with the class and sending notes home to let parents know to discuss bullying openly with their children. ☺

# It's ok to be

STOP THE  
BULLYING. 😊

LISTENING  
THE ~~TICKET~~ WHAT  
DID THEY SAY.  
TO THE CHILDREN



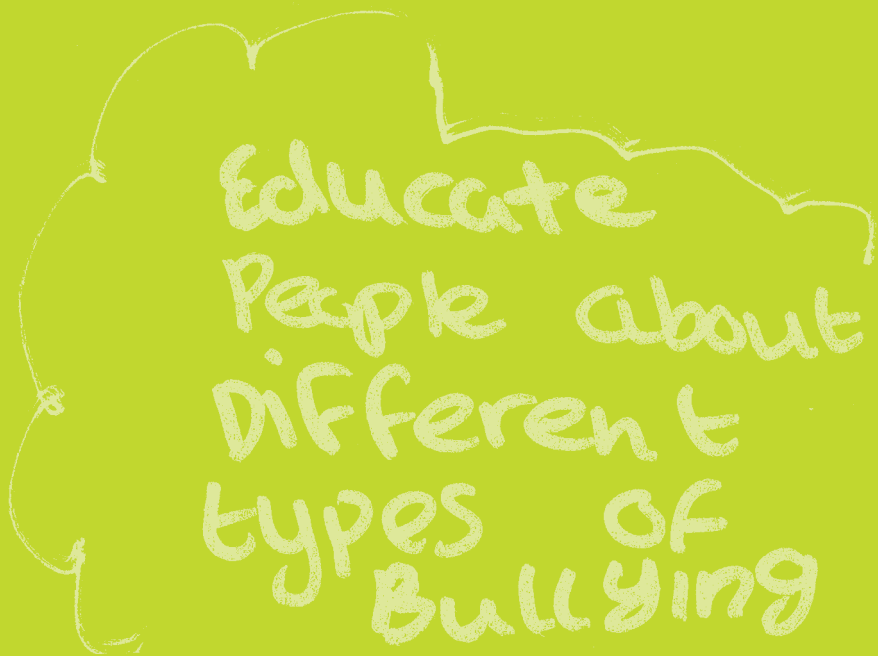
~~The~~ good ways that  
children should be able  
to take part in making  
this plan is  
circle time, being on  
on your own opinion and  
discussing it with  
others. !!!

Meetings twice a week

- Staff
- Students are involved in the
- Bring in inspectors to school
- Teachers on Yard Duty to see break time

They should check at least once  
Students should be asked their opinion

# RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT BULLYING







- Children and young people agreed that students need to be fully informed about their schools' anti-bullying policy. They indicated that it is insufficient to simply inform members of the school community that bullying will not be tolerated or that the school has a policy to deal with incidents of bullying: children and young people, as well as parents, teachers and other staff, need to know what the schools' policy is for preventing bullying and for handling incidents of bullying if they do arise. As regards approaches to informing students about what their school's anti-bullying policy says, participants made a range of suggestions, which included:
  - *displaying posters around the school and in every classroom;*
  - *dedicating a special school assembly at the start of the school year to outlining the school's anti-bullying policy;*
  - *making a short film about the school's anti-bullying policy and showing it to every class at the beginning of the school year;*
  - *having a talk or discussion in class, facilitated by teachers;*
  - *including information about the policy, including advice and tips, in students' school journals or homework diaries;*
  - *presenting key points of the policy as a comic-strip;*
  - *painting a special mural on a wall in the school yard;*
  - *putting information on the school's website;*
  - *giving students' a leaflet, which they can go through with their teachers in class and/or talk with their parents about at home.*

Several children and young people emphasised that schools' anti-bullying policies need to be presented not only in language and formats that are appropriate to students' ages and abilities, but in ways that are "interesting" and "engaging" so that children and young people will pay attention to the messages and information being communicated to them. In this regard, many participants recommended that schools can support students to understand why the policy and respect for it are so important by highlighting through real-life stories and examples the hurt and harm that bullying can cause.



- A number of young people emphasised that the value of anti-bullying policies ultimately depends on schools' willingness and capacity to implement them. In this regard, several young people suggested that "there is no point" in a school having an anti-bullying policy if it is not put into practice effectively. On a related point, one group of young people felt that it is "hypocritical" of schools to express through anti-bullying policies and codes of behaviour commitments to respecting diversity, supporting equality and inclusion, and promoting the safety, welfare and happiness of students if they do not implement measures to uphold these commitments in practice and intervene appropriately and effectively to deal with behaviours that not only contravene such values, but in doing so can compromise the dignity, wellbeing and safety of students who are targeted.
- Many participating children and young people also expressed the view that it is important that schools monitor and review their anti-bullying policy on a regular basis to ensure that it is working and to identify ways in which it might be further improved. Although participants had different opinions about how frequently schools should undertake such reviews, they held a shared view that a whole school approach, inclusive of principals, teachers, other school staff, parents and students, should be taken to this process. One group of children also suggested that school inspectors have a valuable role to play in monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of schools' anti-bullying policies. Several groups identified different ways in which students could be facilitated to participate in reviewing their school's anti-bullying policy, namely:
  - *discussions in class with teachers;*
  - *talking with parents;*
  - *communicating feedback to class representatives on the student council;*
  - *having the option of giving anonymous feedback via suggestion boxes in every classroom;*
  - *having regular meetings with staff that enable students to share their views on issues arising in school that are important to them, including, if they wish, the effectiveness of the school's anti-bullying policy.*

## Awareness raising and education

One of two areas that almost all participants in the consultation dedicated considerable time to discussing and identified as central to schools' efforts to prevent bullying was awareness raising and education. Notably, many groups not only spoke about the importance of initiatives to raise awareness and understanding of bullying, but also of education programmes that could indirectly contribute to the prevention of bullying by virtue of promoting knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that recognise the inherent dignity and worth of every person and demonstrate respect for diversity and equality:

- Children and young people identified a number of topics that they felt need to be included in initiatives to improve awareness and understanding of bullying:
  - the different types of bullying that exist, including homophobic bullying, racial bullying, and cyber-bullying;
  - types of behaviours that can be understood as or can amount to bullying;
  - how it feels to be bullied, including the immediate and longer term physical, psychological and emotional effects that bullying can have on a child and the potentially fatal and tragic consequences of bullying;
  - reasons why people may become involved in bullying behaviours and the negative effects that bullying can have on bullies themselves.

Participants were particularly emphatic about the importance of supporting children and young people to fully appreciate the hurt and harm that can be caused by bullying. In addition, several groups of young people underscored that work with children and young people on bullying must differentiate between different types of bullying; they maintained that a "one size fits all" approach, which obscures diverse rationales for and forms of bullying (homophobic bullying, racial bullying, etc.) under the general heading of 'bullying' can result in valuable learning being lost and opportunities to address prejudices being missed.

- Participants had a wide range of suggestions as regards approaches to educating children and young people about bullying. They expressed the view that the issue of bullying should be addressed with children and young people in the context of curriculum teaching and learning (through programmes and subjects such as Stay Safe, SPHE and CSPE) *and* through whole school events and initiatives. As regards curriculum teaching and learning, several groups of young people felt that more time and priority should be afforded to work focused on young people's social and personal development and to supporting young people to explore issues that are of real concern to them in their daily lives. Participants' ideas in relation to methods of raising awareness among and educating children and young people about bullying included:

- *having one or more school assemblies each year focused on the issue of bullying and, in this context, showing a film that tells the true story of a child affected by bullying;*
- *holding an anti-bullying day or week in school every year, which everyone in the school takes part in and every class contributes to through showcasing a project they have done on the issue of bullying (e.g. performing a song or short play they have prepared, showing a short film they have made, and inviting fellow students to play a game or take part in a quiz they have created);*
- *dedicating several classes each year to facilitating workshops with students on the issue of bullying and using participative and/or creative methods such as role-plays/reversals, stories, cartoons and films to engage students' interest and develop both their understanding and, critically, their empathy;*
- *displaying posters in classrooms that inform students about bullying;*
- *inviting in external speakers, who either have personal experience of bullying or who have professional knowledge to share with students about the issue.*

In discussing approaches to educating children and young people about bullying, it was notable that participants consistently emphasised the importance and value of real life stories documenting the damaging effects that bullying can have. There were differences of opinion among children and young people about who might be best placed to work with children and young people on the issue of bullying; some participants thought teachers would be well-placed to do this work, some felt it would be preferable to have external speakers/facilitators with specific knowledge and/or experience of the issue while others were of the view that a combination of both would work best.

- While participants' discussions about the need to improve awareness and understanding of bullying focused primarily on education for children and young people, a number of groups also spoke about the importance of educating parents and,

in particular, teachers. They made the point that, as teachers have an important role to play in educating children and young people about bullying they need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and resource materials to do so effectively. In addition, given teachers' roles in relation to managing and monitoring students' behaviour and intervening when incidents of bullying do occur in school, it is really important that teachers have a thorough understanding of the issues so they can fulfil these roles effectively. In this regard, several groups of young people again underscored that education for teachers about bullying must differentiate between different types of bullying and equip teachers with the confidence to explore underlying causes of bullying (homophobia, racism, etc.) with students and, with that, challenge stereotypes and stigma. One group of young people proposed that teachers and students should learn about bullying together as this could help to develop a shared understanding among teachers and students of the issue as well as solidarity about the importance of addressing it.

- A majority of participants in the consultation made the point that children and young people can become a target of bullying for many different reasons, including their ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, family circumstances, care situation, how they look, dress or talk, or because they are perceived as an "easy" target. It was notable that many participants chose to highlight the corresponding importance of delivering education programmes in schools that develop students' respect for diversity and equality. In this regard, one group of young people emphasised the importance of doing this work with children from an early age. Several groups of young people emphasised the need for students to have opportunities to explore diversity and different aspects of identity; to learn about the experiences, circumstances and traditions of different groups of people; and to appreciate the challenges that certain groups may face. Young people in three of the consultation workshops made explicit reference in this regard to sexual identity and the issue of homophobia while a group of young people with physical disabilities shared their experiences of making short films about perceptions of disability, including perceptions held by members of a school community. Participants across the workshops consistently argued that education on matters relating to diversity is a key measure to tackle stereotyping and stigma and, as such, one that can contribute to the prevention of bullying. With reference to their own experiences, several participants also recommended a number of additional measures that schools might take to promote positive and inclusive relationships among students. These included holding a 'friendship week' in school each year and using group-based learning methods as much as possible to facilitate students to learn more about one another and to develop students' capacities for cooperation and collaboration.

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## Homophobic Bullying

*Young people in three of the OCO's consultation workshops identified homophobic bullying as one area of particular concern that needs to be addressed. Their principal messages in this regard were:*

- While sexual identity and sexual orientation are important issues of concern to young people, they are not discussed openly in schools and students do not have adequate opportunities to explore these issues in the context of curriculum teaching and learning. Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to facilitate students to learn about and discuss matters relating to sexual identity and orientation. Schools need to play a role in promoting "acceptance of LGBT people because they are people too" and understanding that "homosexuality is normal and acceptable". Educating young people about these issues is an essential measure for the prevention of homophobic bullying.
- Initiatives and programmes focused on developing students' awareness and understanding of bullying, including its causes and effects, must deal explicitly with the issue of homophobic bullying if the practices of stereotyping and stigmatisation of LGBT young people by their peer group are to be addressed. Among other things, students need to understand that "certain words, such as 'fag', should not be used as everyday swear words", that "being gay isn't a choice" and that everyone needs and takes "their own time to find their sexual orientation."
- Schools need to appreciate how difficult it can be for LGBT young people to speak up about homophobic bullying if the issue of homophobia is never discussed or they perceive the culture within their school to be homophobic or tolerant of homophobic attitudes and behaviours. It is not enough for schools to promote equality and respect for diversity; they must be willing to put these principles into practice.
- Principals, teachers, guidance counsellors and other school staff also need to be aware that LGBT young people who are targets of homophobic bullying may be in particular need of support from them because they may not feel ready to speak to their friends or parents/families about what is happening.

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## Cyber-bullying

*Several young people spoke of their concerns about cyber-bullying, with one young person characterising it as a form of “stalking”. They were of the view that it is a “big issue” and that schools must play a role in efforts to tackle it. In particular, they felt that schools could participate in ensuring that children and young people are more fully informed about cyber-bullying by:*

- explaining what cyber-bullying is and what forms it can take;
  - encouraging children and young people to take responsibility for their words and actions online and sensitising children and young people to the impact that their words and actions online can have;
  - supporting children and young people to fully appreciate the damaging and sometimes devastating consequences of cyber-bullying on victims;
  - highlighting to children and young people that there can also be adverse consequences for those who engage in cyber-bullying, including the existence of a permanent record of their actions, which they may regret in the future when they are no longer involved in this kind of behaviour;
  - advising children and young people about what they should do if they experience or come across cyber-bullying – for example, save the comments/emails; speak to a parent, teacher or another trusted adult about it; and report it immediately to the service provider.
-

## Intervention Strategies

As regards intervention strategies, participants in the OCO's consultation focused on two areas: how children and young people can be supported to speak up and how schools should intervene when incidents of bullying arise.

### Supporting children to speak up

Measures to support children and young people to speak up if they are being bullied, witness bullying or are involved in bullying were considered by participants to be vitally important area for action:

- There was consensus among participants that speaking up about bullying is a difficult thing to do and something that many children and young people would be very reluctant to do. Reasons given for this included:
  - fear of reprisals by bullies;
  - bullies sometimes being the "popular kids" in school who other children and young people want to be friends with rather than "tell on";
  - concerns about being perceived as a "tell-tale" and, with that, being isolated by their wider peer-group;
  - embarrassment or shame at having been targeted by bullies ("bullying makes people self-conscious");
  - concerns about "getting into trouble" with the principal or a teacher for reporting bullying;
  - not having evidence to back up a bullying allegation (e.g. a witness or record such as a saved text message);
  - not knowing how the matter will be dealt with by the school;
  - not feeling fully confident of being believed or that the school will follow up and deal with the matter fairly and effectively.

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN TO SPEAK UP

Why Can't the Children say anything about it? The Bullies often threaten people they Bully. Children need someone they trust in school. If they tell someone about it can be stopped.



- Students could write down their  
give it to a teacher that they trust.

Don't  
Say  
there's  
nothing wrong  
when there  
is!!

Speaking Up: It's not just students  
teachers need to speak up if they  
could talk to a superior or the  
even teachers don't pay attention to  
Teachers don't tend to speak up.  
Other students should report to  
that somebody is being bullied.  
with before they get worse

Primary School OK to talk to teacher.

Secondary School harder to talk to the teacher.

Could talk to friends or family

One go to person / Guidance councillor

Young people can be afraid to speak up. because they be threatened by bully




Every - one  
Friend to encourage  
up


Tell Someone  
You trust

- In light of children's and young people's reluctance to speak up about bullying, participants were of the view that parents, teachers and other staff in the school need to be proactive. A number of groups identified early intervention as essential in order "to prevent further escalation of tension and undue stress". Examples of pre-emptive measures identified by participants included:
  - parents checking in regularly with their children about how they are getting on in school;
  - teachers and other school staff being alert to signs of potential bullying and that a student may be having difficulties even if they say or look like they are fine ("I'm okay is the biggest lie ever.");
  - teachers reminding students regularly that they can talk to them if they have concerns, including about bullying;
  - principals, teachers and other staff in the school establishing supportive, respectful relationships with students so that, if a child or young person finds themselves in difficulty, they will be more likely to feel comfortable and confident about approaching a member of staff;
  - schools having adequate levels of supervision, particularly at break times and in the yard, and using any security cameras that are already in place effectively, but appropriately, to support monitoring ("if there is video evidence of what's going on, young people won't have to speak up themselves");
  - schools establishing a culture where speaking up is encouraged and seen as a positive thing to do rather than as "telling" or "ratting";
  - schools offering students clear guidance about what steps to take if they are being bullied or witness bullying and ensuring students understand how the school deals with bullying.

- Participants had different views on who children and young people might be willing to approach if they are being bullied or witness bullying. Those named were:

- 
- *parents;*
  - *the principal;*
  - *class teachers;*
  - *guidance counsellors;*
  - *SNAs;*
  - *nominated older students;*
  - *prefects;*
  - *meitheal/mentors.*

Several participants suggested that children in primary schools would be more likely to speak with their parents or teachers and that young people in post-primary schools might be more inclined to speak with guidance counsellors, their friends or with nominated older students (e.g. prefects or mentors) who could in turn support them to communicate with a member of staff in school. Some participants felt there should be one “go to” person that students are encouraged to approach while others thought it important that children and young people feel they have options as regards who they can talk to about bullying. In this regard, a number of groups suggested that the key issue is not who children and young people should go to, but rather that they can identify at least one person who they “trust” and consider “approachable”. Two groups of young people who made this point were asked to characterise a person who is approachable. Words/phrases used included:

- 
- *friendly;*
  - *respectful and respected;*
  - *a good listener;*
  - *kind;*
  - *understanding;*
  - *caring;*
  - *open-minded;*
  - *patient;*
  - *calm;*
  - *able to give good advice.*

Both groups also emphasised that, from a young person's perspective, an approachable person will be someone who "will take the issue seriously."

- Several participants who suggested that young people themselves (i.e. nominated students, prefects or mentors) could or should be among "go to" people for students to report bullying emphasised that such an approach:
  - should not involve students assuming inappropriate levels of responsibility;
  - would have to include measures to equip students with the capacity, knowledge and skills to fulfil this role;
  - could only be done where there is buy-in from the whole school community, particularly students, and where steps are taken to mitigate potential risks for students undertaking this role.
- Participants made several suggestions as regards methods schools could use to support students to report bullying:
  - having a buddy or mentor system in place so that students do not need to report bullying on their own;
  - establishing a mechanism for students to report concerns via their school's website;
  - informing students about any helplines that are appropriate routes for reporting incidents of bullying;
  - having a dedicated space in students' school journals or homework diaries where they can note concerns, which will then be seen and followed up by teachers and/or parents;
  - having "talk to teacher" boxes in every classroom where children can place messages about any concerns or worries they may have;
  - identifying a time and place during the school day/week that offers students privacy to report concerns to a member of staff.

Notably, a message communicated time and again by children and young people across participating groups was that a key enabler for students as regards reporting concerns about bullying is that they can do so “anonymously” or “privately”. While this may present a challenge to schools as regards following up on reports, a majority of participants felt that creating routes for students to report concerns “in private and confidence” is a necessary measure to mitigate students’ fears about the negative repercussions that speaking up may have for them.

### Handling incidents of bullying

While it was not a strong focus of their discussions, participating children and young people did share viewpoints on how schools should deal with incidents of bullying when they arise. Their main messages in this regard were:

- All incidents of bullying need to be noted, reported, taken seriously and dealt with promptly, appropriately and effectively.
- Students may not always have evidence to support their allegations of bullying. As the absence of witnesses or other evidence does not mean that bullying has not occurred, schools need to establish ways of responding to such reports.
- Schools should have the capacity to deal with incidents of bullying internally. Gardaí or other external professionals should only be brought in in cases where a school finds it cannot resolve the bullying or when a very serious incident of bullying occurs.
- Victims of bullying may not always be able to identify someone to talk to and seek support from. In such cases, they may think that “violence is the only option” and feel “driven to fight back”. Schools need to be alert to this possibility and ensure that they do not get involved in secondary victimisation by punishing a student for retaliating instead of dealing with the bullying that prompted them to fight back.
- It is very important to listen to what the students involved, i.e. victims of bullying, alleged bullies and any witnesses have to say. Parents of students who have been bullied and of alleged bullies need to be involved in schools’ response to incidents of bullying.
- Students should be facilitated to participate on a case-by-case basis in identifying solutions to specific bullying incidents they are directly involved in. Schools should use restorative methods, including mediation, to support victims and perpetrators of bullying to understand one another and resolve their differences.

- Once an incident of bullying has been dealt with by a school, teachers and other staff should continue to monitor interactions and relationships between those students involved in the incident as incidents of bullying, once dealt with, can “flare up” again.
- Schools should make counselling and other appropriate supports available to children and young people who are victims of bullying.
- Threats of suspension and expulsion do not prevent bullying from happening. While it is important that there are consequences and sanctions for bullying, suspension and expulsion are ineffective responses: removing a child/young person responsible for bullying temporarily or permanently from the school may stop the bullying from taking place in the school, but it does not deal with the underlying reasons why the bullying has occurred. Students who bully need support to address their bullying behaviours so these behaviours do not persist into the future. Students who have been responsible for bullying in the past, but are no longer involved in bullying should not be stigmatised by their school community.





The teacher should talk  
the Bully after school.

You can talk about bullying  
and ask them why they do

Help people  
When there  
getting bullied!

They don't want people knowing their  
issues and if people knew, they  
would make fun of them and make  
it worse.



Bullys should have someone to talk to

\* School Journals - Code of Behavior

↳ they say things they don't

\* Shouldn't suspend people for Bullying

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools occupy a vital place in the lives of children, their families and communities. From its engagement schools across the country, the OCO is aware of the significant roles that principals, teachers and other school staff play in children's and young people's lives and of the different ways in which schools can be involved in promoting and protecting a wide range of children's rights on a daily basis. In this regard, while the OCO's experience during the last eight years confirms that parents are the strongest and most tenacious advocates for children, it also points to the wide network of professionals, including principals and teachers, who are prepared to act and advocate on behalf of children, including children who are among the most vulnerable in our society.

Bullying among children and young people is one of several challenges that professionals working in schools can encounter. In the context of implementing its statutory mandate to deal with complaints, the OCO has had occasion to consider the manner in which bullying is handled by schools and, as a result of this work, is aware of factors that can impede schools' ability to deal with incidents of bullying effectively. Among these are: bullying can occur in places that are hidden from view of school staff; bullying behaviours can be symptomatic of factors arising in a child's life outside of school, including at home and in the community; and the reticence of children to speak up about bullying. As such, while schools certainly have an important role to play in the prevention of bullying and intervening when incidents of bullying arise, efforts to tackle bullying cannot be delegated to schools; if bullying and its causes are to be tackled effectively, responsibility for doing so needs to be shared appropriately among children and young people themselves, their parents and carers, professionals working across the education system, and society more generally.

The OCO is aware of the range of existing measures focused on tackling bullying among children and young people. Taking into account the Office's experience of dealing with complaints related to bullying in schools and the views and ideas shared with the Office by children and young people who participated in this consultation, the OCO recommends that future work with and by schools to build their capacity to deal effectively with bullying will include a focus on the following areas:

- At a school level, a whole school approach needs to be taken to the development, implementation and review of measures to combat bullying; *all* members of the school community – boards of management, principals, teaching and non-teaching staff, parents/carers, and children and young people themselves - need to be encouraged and supported to play active roles and to take appropriate levels of responsibility.
- Initiatives focused on dealing with bullying might usefully take a two-strand approach that comprises prevention and intervention strategies. Key preventive measures include:
  - *A dedicated anti-bullying policy*: Every school should have a dedicated anti-bullying policy, which is developed, implemented and monitored, as appropriate, by all members of the school community. An anti-bullying policy should include a statement of the school's core values; provide an express commitment on the part of the school community to dealing with bullying; offer clear definitions of different types of bullying and bullying behaviours; set out what measures the school will take to prevent bullying; and clarify how incidents of bullying will be dealt with. Details of the policy need to be communicated clearly to all staff, students and parents/carers and an inclusive approach should be taken to facilitating a periodic review of the policy's effectiveness by all members of the school community.
  - *Awareness raising about bullying*: Schools need to allocate time, including in the context of curriculum teaching and learning, to raising awareness and understanding of bullying. Among the topics that should be addressed in this regard are: the different types of bullying that exist; the behaviours that can be understood as bullying or can amount to bullying; the reasons why people may become involved in bullying behaviours; and, in particular, the hurt and harm that bullying can cause, including the immediate and longer term physical, psychological and emotional effects that bullying can have on victims.
  - *Human rights education*: It is vital that schools address the root causes of bullying by promoting and modelling through day-to-day practice a culture that respects human rights and corresponding responsibilities. Dedicated programmes and initiatives need to be implemented, which tackle the discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that can give rise to different types of bullying and which facilitate children and young people to appreciate diversity, explore different aspects of identity, and learn about the experiences, circumstances and traditions of different groups of people. In this regard, teachers need the requisite encouragement, training and educational resource materials to facilitate them to explore issues, including sensitive issues, relating to diversity, equality and inclusion (details of the OCO's rights education programme are on [www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)).

- As regards interventions, a key area for action in terms of early intervention concerns the identification and implementation of measures that *encourage and support children and young people to speak up* if they are being bullied, witness bullying or are involved in bullying. In this respect, it will be worthwhile for schools to consider the reasons why students are reluctant to come forward, several of which have been identified by children and young people consulted by the OCO and highlighted accordingly in this report. In addition, and taking into account the reticence of children and young people to report bullying, parents/carers and professionals working in schools need to be pre-emptive by, for example, regularly asking children and young people how they are getting on in school; being alert to signs of bullying; ensuring there are adequate levels of supervision; and nurturing positive relationships with students that will indirectly encourage them to approach a member of staff about a concern if the need arises. As regards handling incidents of bullying, important elements of a child-sensitive approach will include facilitating the involvement of students directly affected by a given incident and their parents/carers in resolving the matter and, whenever possible, implementing *restorative methods* such as mediation to support victims and perpetrators of bullying to resolve their differences.
- As noted by the children and young people themselves who participated in the OCO's consultation, schools need to have access to guidance and support across the education system that builds their capacity to prevent bullying and to deal appropriately and effectively with bullying when it occurs. Stakeholders and partners within the education system, including those working at a national policy level and in the areas of monitoring and inspection, training, and curriculum development need to collaborate with schools to identify measures that can build in a meaningful way on existing initiatives to address the issue of bullying. In addition, it will be worthwhile to consider how schools can be further facilitated to share learning with one another in relation to good practice and to access supports outside the formal education system as and when the need arises.





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Primary School ok to talk to teacher.

Secondary School harder to talk to the teacher.

could talk to friends or family

One go to person / Guidance councillor

Young People can be afraid to speak up. because they be threatened by bully



Every - one should  
friend to encourage  
up

Tell Someone  
You trust

## **Ombudsman for Children**

Millenium House

52 – 56 Great Strand Street  
Dublin 1

Phone 01 865 6800

Email [oco@oco.ie](mailto:oco@oco.ie)

Web [www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)

## **Oifig an Ombudsman do Leanaí**

Teach na Mílaoise

52 – 56 Sráid na Trá Mhór  
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán 01 865 6800

R-phost [oco@oco.ie](mailto:oco@oco.ie)

Gréasán [www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)