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Addressing school violence and bullying: Evidence briefing

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About this briefing

NHS Health Scotland was asked by the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate Health and Wellbeing Unit to review what works to prevent and reduce school violence and bullying. This paper brings together international review-level evidence and published outcome evaluations of programmes implemented in schools in the UK and Ireland. The purpose of this report is to inform the development of policy, guidance and support on bullying and violence in schools. Ultimately, this will contribute to the following national outcomes:

- We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential.
- We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society.

This paper summarises the findings of the review undertaken by the Evidence for Action team at NHS Health Scotland. The full report can be found on NHS Health Scotland's website. Support for schools is available from The National Improvement Hub[*] and respect*me*, Scotland's anti-bullying service.

Key points

Why is this important?

- School violence and bullying can have long-term consequences for children and young people's health and wellbeing.
- Bullying among school-aged children and young people can take place in and outside the classroom, on the way to and from school, as well as online. Children and young people who appear or are perceived as different from the general school population, such as those with characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010, are at particular risk from bullying.
- Estimates of the number of school-aged children who experience bullying vary. In Scotland, 30% of children who responded to the 2014 respect*me* survey reported that they had been bullied since the start of the school year. In the 2014 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey in Scotland, almost one-quarter of 13-year-old girls reported being bullied via electronic media at least once in the previous two months.

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[*] The National Improvement Hub provides access to: self-evaluation and improvement frameworks; research; teaching and assessment resources; exemplars of practice; and support for online collaboration and networks through Glow.

What works to prevent or reduce school violence and bullying?

- There is international review-level evidence that universal school-based programmes can have beneficial effects on violence and bullying in school settings. However, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about which programmes or components are the most effective, as all the reviews found that while some programmes were effective in some aspects of bullying prevention, others were not.

- Published outcome evaluations of school-based programmes to prevent violence and bullying conducted in the UK or Ireland are scarce. Robust evaluations of programmes are necessary to increase our knowledge of what works in a Scottish context. It is possible that what works well in one school may not work as well in another.

- Whole-school strategies that implement a range of complementary approaches to prevent as well as respond to bullying behaviours, tailored to the context of the school, and integrated into existing systems, are likely to be more effective than approaches delivered in isolation.

- School anti-bullying policies provide the framework for a consistent whole-school approach to prevent and respond to bullying. Programmes that include the establishment of a comprehensive policy have been found to more effective than those without.

Background

School violence and bullying can have both short- and long-term consequences for children and young people's health and wellbeing. School violence and bullying are related, but distinct, behaviours (Figure 1).[1] Bullying involves an imbalance of power that aggressive and violent behaviours do not necessarily involve.[2]

Figure 1: School violence and bullying. Diagram adapted from source[1][†]
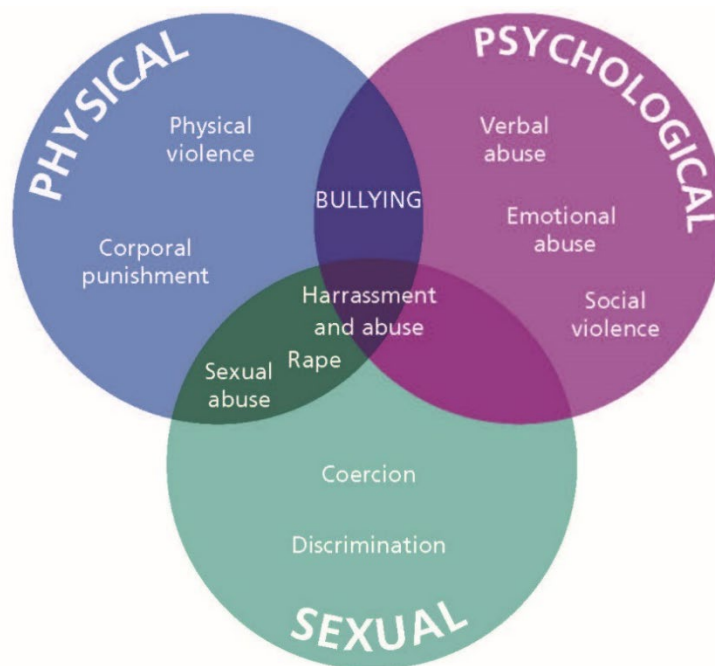
In Scotland, Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People provides an overarching framework for all anti-bullying work. Bullying is defined as:

> 'both behaviour and impact; the impact is on a person's capacity to feel in control of themselves…Bullying takes place in the context of relationships; it is behaviour that can make people feel hurt, threatened, frightened and left out. This behaviour happens face to face and online. This behaviour can harm people physically or emotionally and, although the actual behaviour may not be repeated, the threat may be sustained over time, typically by actions, looks, messages, confrontations, physical interventions, or the fear of these."[3][‡]

[†]page 15
[‡] Page 10 of the source document.

Bullying happens within a framework of social relationships between individuals who bully others, those who experience bullying and, usually, those who witness the bullying behaviour. Children and young people can be both bullied and bully others.[4] Bullying can take place in and outside the classroom, on the way to and from school as well as online.[1]

Bullying among school-aged children and young people happens throughout the world. The proportion of children and young people who experience bullying and those who display bullying behaviours varies, depending on their gender, age and country of residence.[5] In an online survey sent to all schools in Scotland in 2014, 30% of children aged between eight and 19 years reported they had experienced bullying since the start of the school year.[6] Bullying using electronic and computer-based applications is known as online bullying.[§] In the 2014 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey in Scotland, almost one-quarter of 13-year-old girls reported being bullied via electronic media at least once in the previous two months.[2]

Bullying behaviour[**] may be the result of prejudice that is linked with perceived or actual differences in others' characteristics or circumstances.[3] This includes children and young people with characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010[††] as well as other aspects such as additional support needs and physical appearance. Children and young people who appear or are perceived as different from the general population are at particular risk of being bullied (Figure 2).[1] Children and young people whose sexual orientation, gender identity or expression does not conform to traditional gender norms tend to be disproportionately affected.[1] The social environment within a school is likely to be

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[§] Also often known as 'cyberbullying'.

[**] It is important to make 'a clear distinction between bullying and criminal offences such as hate crime, child sexual exploitation and gender based violence such as domestic abuse and sexual assault. For instance, when someone is coerced or pressurised to do something sexual or is touched inappropriately, this is not bullying, this is sexual assault or abuse and a form of gender-based violence'. Page 12.[3]

[††] Disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, age, and marriage and civil partnership are not protected characteristics within school education.[3]

important factor for school violence and bullying.[7] Perceptions of a poor school climate[‡‡] have been linked with more reports of bullying behaviours.[8]

Figure 2: Risk factors for school violence and bullying. Adapted from source.[1,§§]

Disability	**Gender**	**Poverty or social status**
Ethnic, linguistic or cultural differencs including migrant or refugee status	**Physical Appearance**	**Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression**
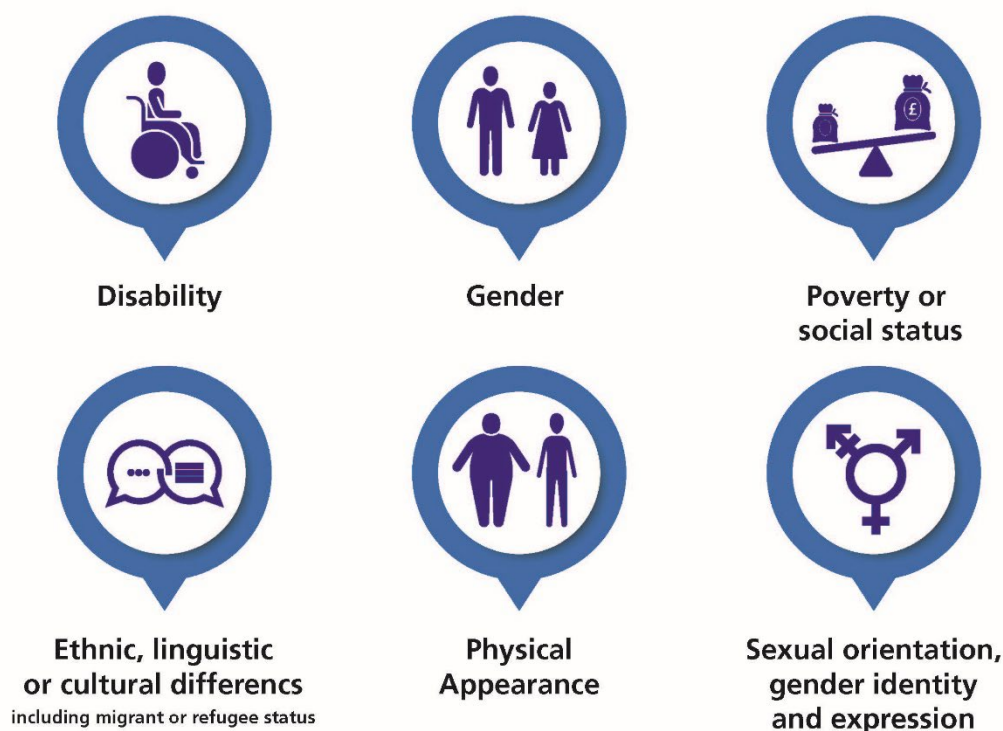
What works to prevent or reduce school violence and bullying?

This review brings together international review-level evidence and information about programmes with published outcome evaluations conducted in the UK or Ireland. The focus is universal programmes that are delivered to the general school population rather than on interventions that are targeted at children who are displaying aggressive or bullying behaviours or those who have been bullied. Four main topics were included: bullying, online bullying, aggressive and violent behaviours, and adolescent relationship violence.[***]

[‡‡] The term 'school climate' is used to capture loosely related factors such as respectful and supportive relationships and feelings of safety, inclusiveness and fairness.[37]
[§§] Page 16 of the source document.
[***] 'teen dating violence or intimate partner violence [which] entails the perpetration and/or victimisation of violence between intimate partners during teenage years, which can take many forms – physical, sexual or emotional, or a combination of these.'[38] Page 8.

The search strategy identified 34 international reviews along with published[†††] outcome evaluations of nine programmes that had been implemented in schools in the UK or Ireland. Five programmes had been developed in the UK or Ireland (including one in Scotland), three in North America and one in Finland. Successful transfer of programmes developed in countries outside the UK and Ireland may depend on the degree to which the programme is aligned to local educational approaches and context.[9] More details about the individual programmes reviewed can be found in the full report of this review on NHS Health Scotland's website.

Bullying

There is consistent international review-level evidence that anti-bullying programmes can have positive effects on bullying-related outcomes such as bullying behaviour, being bullied, or attitudes and beliefs about bullying. However, all of the reviews found that while some programmes were effective in some aspects of bullying prevention, others were not. It has been estimated that, on average, anti-bullying programmes are able to reduce bullying behaviours by 19–20% and the rates of being bullied by 15–16%.[10]

School anti-bullying policies provide the framework for a consistent whole-school approach to prevent and respond to bullying.[11] In particular, there is international review-level evidence that in schools that had a comprehensive anti-bullying policy, which explicitly prohibited bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity, lower rates of being bullied were reported by LGBT pupils.[12] Anti-bullying programmes that included the establishment of a school policy have been found to be more effective than those that didn't.[13,14]

There is consistent evidence from three individual programmes, identified for this review, that anti-bullying programmes have the potential to reduce rates of being bullied and bullying behaviours.[15–17] However, little is known about whether or not benefits are sustained after the programme ends.

[†††] In peer review or grey literature.

Online bullying

Overall, there is international review-level evidence that school-based programmes designed specifically to prevent or reduce online bullying have the potential to be beneficial. On average, programmes have been found to reduce online bullying behaviours by 9–15% and rates of being bullied by 14–15%.[18] No individual programmes, implemented and evaluated in the UK and Ireland, which were designed specifically to tackle online bullying were found. This makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about what might work best in Scotland.

Aggressive and violent behaviours

In general, there is international review-level evidence that universal programmes which aim to prevent or reduce aggression or violence in schools can have beneficial effects. Evaluations that reported changes in attitudes and beliefs about violence were more likely to report positive effects.[19] Improving the school social environment was found to have potential positive effects on reducing aggressive and violence behaviours.[20]

Three individual programmes implemented in the UK or Ireland were identified for this review. The evidence from these programmes was more mixed than the review-level evidence. Positive outcomes included beneficial changes in attitudes to conflict resolution and the use of violence among pupils who had taken part in one violence prevention programme,[21–23] and improvements in teacher-rated pro-social behaviours of children who had taken part in another programme.[24–26] However, no evidence was found that a third programme improved pupil behaviour.[27]

Adolescent relationship violence

Overall, there is inconsistent international review-level evidence that programmes that aim to prevent physical, emotional or sexual violence within adolescents' intimate peer relationships can be effective in reducing the numbers of young people who report being exposed to or instigating violence within their partner relationships. Evaluations that reported changes in knowledge of or attitudes to violence within relationships were more likely to report positive effects.[28] These effects tended to be lessened at follow-up.[29]

Three individual programmes implemented in the UK or Ireland were identified for this review. Overall, children and young people expressed attitudes that were less supportive of sexual violence and/or domestic abuse after taking part. In addition, they reported more knowledge of the relevant law and of sources of support for those affected.[30–32] However, it is not known whether or not changes in attitudes and beliefs are likely to make a difference to an individual's behaviour.[29]

Conclusion

This paper has examined evaluations of school-based programmes, published in academic and grey literature, that aim to prevent school violence and bullying. In general, there was evidence at international review level that school-based programmes can help prevent school violence and bullying. However, the literature suggests while some programmes are effective, others are not. It is surprising that even though many schools have anti-bullying programmes in place[16,33] and there are many examples of school-based violence prevention programmes,[‡‡‡] only a small number of outcome evaluations of programmes to prevent school violence and bullying carried out in the UK and Ireland were found. This means that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about what might work best in Scotland.

School violence and bullying are complex and multi-factorial behaviours.[34] This means that implementing a single strategy, such as social skills training, in isolation is unlikely to tackle the problem in the longer term.[34] The available evidence suggests that whole-school approaches can be effective in preventing and reducing school violence and bullying.[13,19,35] These strategies usually include a range of complementary approaches such as promotion of a positive school climate, playground supervision and curriculum-based elements underpinned by a robust anti-bullying policy.[36] The quality and consistency of implementation is important for positive outcomes.

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‡‡‡ See Arnot J. Examples of projects to prevent and reduce violence in Scotland. Glasgow: ScotPHN; 2018.

Sources of further information and support for schools

Bullying

- Scottish Government (2017). Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People. This report provides the overarching framework for all anti-bullying work that is undertaken in Scotland. The approach aims to build capacity, resilience and skills in children and young people, and all those who play a role in their lives, to prevent and deal with bullying.
- Scottish Government (2018). Respect for All: Supplementary Guidance on Recording and Monitoring of Bullying Incidents in Schools.
- LBGT Youth Scotland. Addressing Inclusion Effectively Challenging Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.
- LGBT Youth Scotland. Supporting Transgender Young People: Guidance for Schools in Scotland.
- respect*me* – Scotland's Anti-Bullying Service. The website has resources for school staff, parents and carers as well as children and young people, including information about internet safety.
- respect*me*. Policy through to Practice – Getting it Right. Anti-Bullying Policy Guidance for Schools and Children & Young People's Services
- respect*me* *#respectmeans*. This learning resource contains practical activities that can be used with children and young people as part of wider learning around positive relationships and bullying behaviour.
- respect*me*. Responding to Bullying - What are my options?
- Bullying – what can I do? [YouTube video]. This learning resource contains practical activities which can help children and young people explore the options open to them if they or someone they know is being bullied.
- UNESCO. School Violence and Bullying Global Status Report Paris; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; 2017.

Online bullying

- Childnet International. Cyberbullying: Prevent Understand, and Respond Guidance for Schools.
- Childnet International. Crossing the Line: PSHE toolkit.

Internet safety

- Scottish Government (2017). National Action Plan on Internet Safety for Children and Young People.
- The 360 degree safe self-review tool is free to use and is intended to help schools review their e-safety policy and practice. It provides:
  - information that can influence the production or review of e-safety policies and develop good practice
  - a process for identifying strengths and weaknesses.
  - opportunities for commitment and involvement from the whole school.
  - a continuum for schools to discuss how they might move from a basic-level provision for online safety to practice that is aspirational and innovative.

Sexual violence

- Scottish Government (2018). Equally Safe. Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls.
- Scottish Government (2017). Equally Safe. A Delivery Plan for Scotland's Strategy to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls 2017-21.
- RSHP Scotland is a resource currently under development to support schools delivering Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education to children and young people.

School climate

- Scottish Government (2018). Developing a positive whole-school ethos and culture – Relationships, Learning and Behaviour
- respect*me*. Creating the right environment

About NHS Health Scotland's evidence briefings

NHS Health Scotland evidence briefings are produced by the organisation's Evidence for Action (EfA) team. They use systematic methods* to review the most appropriate evidence to provide a robust, quality-assured and balanced assessment of interventions and approaches likely to be effective in improving health and reducing health inequalities. As such, users can have a high degree of confidence that the conclusions/recommendations are valid. Supporting literature reviews and other relevant background papers are often available. Please contact the person named at the end of this briefing for further details.

* The highest degree of confidence can be drawn from the review of existing evidence already critically appraised and quality assured and/or systematic overview and synthesis of existing research evidence from primary and/or review level studies. Protocols for each of these methods have been produced and are available on request.

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