

Tips on working with children who bully



Some children with a mental health problem are more likely to bully others – as well as be bullied themselves. These children can face the very worst long-term mental health problems – including higher chance of suicide.

There could be many reasons why someone bullies – they may act out in this way because something else is going on in their lives. They may also need additional support to help manage psychological distress and aggression or mental health difficulties.

Here are some things that schools can do to support children with mental health problems who bully:

Make pupils aware that their behaviour is wrong

Pupils must understand how their behaviour is impacting on others, and how it affects how others feel. Work with pupils to understand why they behave in a certain way, and how they feel when they carry out this bullying behaviour. Use [this worksheet](#) to help pupils express their feelings.

Get down to the root of the problem

Try to find the root cause of why the pupil is carrying out bullying behaviour. For example, are they:

- ✓ trying to fit in?
- ✓ being bullied or have experienced bullying?
- ✓ acting out because of other things going on in their lives?
- ✓ stressed, anxious, struggling to belong?
- ✓ struggling to manage their mental health problem?
- ✓ struggling to adjust to the school environment?

This may take time, consistency and trust. Consider if the pupil needs to see a school counsellor or receive additional support. Work in partnership with parents and carers to problem solve how to help the child move forward.

Help pupils to manage their behaviour

For pupils with severe and persistent behavioural problems, the most effective strategy is to work in partnership with families and use family-based intervention programmes such as [Incredible Years](#) or [Triple P](#). These provide parents with strategies and techniques which can, over time, help children to manage their behaviour.

Avoid strategies that have negative consequences

Some strategies have been proven to not always be effective for children who bully. Schools should look at the available evidence before implementing the following strategies:

- ✔ **zero-tolerance strategies**, such as three strikes and you're out – this tends to further label and blame a pupil who may then feel more excluded, and as a result their behaviour gets worse
- ✔ **suspending or expelling pupils**, unless all other options haven't been effective. This action can further engrain behaviours and cause more problems later on for the child. It's more effective to get to the bottom of why behaviours are happening in the first place
- ✔ **mediation between the bully and the pupil who was bullied** – the evidence of effectiveness is mixed on this strategy. In some instances this has made the bullying worse. Schools needs to be aware of potential consequences.

