# Anti-bullying case study: protecting students with SEND

Trinity, a small independent school for young learners with autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Asperger syndrome, uses data to make sure it tackles bullying quickly and effectively.

This case study highlights how the school:

- runs annual bullying and safeguarding surveys for students, staff and parents
- uses survey data to produce reports that identify bullying problems and what the school needs to do to tackle them
- records every bullying incident
- uses data to improve its policies, procedures and staff training on bullying

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can be especially vulnerable to bullying. Since 2013, Trinity has been using data to identify where, when, how and why bullying may be happening.

## Identifying the problem

When headteacher Elizabeth Baines took up her role in 2013, there was no data to suggest that bullying was a problem.

As someone who'd personally experienced bullying herself in the past, Elizabeth knew that 'no evidence' did not necessarily mean no bullying. "Data is how you realise what's going on," she says.

## Surveying students

Elizabeth began with surveys, asking students about their experiences of bullying and of reporting it:

- Have you ever been bullied?

- How did it make you feel?

- What did you do about it?

- Did you ever report it?

- If so, who did you report it to?

- What was the outcome?

- If you didn't report it, why?

Trinity based its survey on the template produced by the NSPCC. The school rewrote the questions to make them accessible to learners with significant social and communication difficulties, ensuring that they were able to understand the questions.

To encourage students to take part in surveys each year, Trinity asks them to complete the forms in the classroom. Students can include their names on the form, but don't have to.

When learners first join Trinity, Elizabeth notes that "We found out that most students had the idea that if you report it, you're 'snitching'. They felt completely trapped."

## Act fast, promote trust

To counter the fear of 'snitching', Trinity now encourages everyone in the school to be open and honest when talking about bullying. It teaches students about the importance of respecting others, and of celebrating difference. The school is currently preparing for the next accreditation level as a UNICEF rights respecting school.

Critical to promoting trust among students with SEND is being able to respond to bullying incidents as soon as possible. "For specialist and SEN provision, bullying is something you have to deal with immediately," says Elizabeth. "We deal with the victim and the perpetrator, because there are needs on both sides."

## Recording incidents

When a potential bullying incident is either reported by a pupil or observed by staff, Trinity staff immediately tell the school's safeguarding lead, deputy headteacher Georgina Moorcroft. "Our students have been let down by so many professionals," she explains. "If something does happen to them when they join us, they might not report it."

"Once the students see that we deal with bullying quickly, they start to trust us more."

Staff also record bullying on one of two forms: as either an 'incident' or a 'cause for concern'. Using the cause for concern form means the matter is treated as a safeguarding issue. This means that the school must have due regard to their legal duties to keep children safe.

Georgina compiles data from both forms to look at what is happening across the school. "I can pick out on which days bullying happens. I can see specific lessons where bullying happens, and specific types of incident."

Trinity also has a dedicated 'bullying@' email address for students and parents to report any incidents. "Some of our students find it difficult to communicate," she says. "Some students might just send me a blank email. Straightaway I'll know there's an issue and will start my sensitive investigation."

## Monitoring new starters

One piece of learning to emerge from the data is that bullying often spikes when new students join. While quantitative data (like numbers of incidents) can highlight trends like this, it takes qualitative data (such as students describing what happened) – and further investigation – to work out why those trends might exist.

Trinity has now taken extra steps, such as putting more staff in the playground, to stop any potential bullying involving new starters. Having responded to this as an identified trend, the school finds that learners who have been with Trinity for a while apply positive peer pressure and are quick to report incidents and raise the alarm. This has in turn reduced the number of bullying incidences as a direct result of the education that learners have received and their trust in the school's policy and procedure in dealing with concerns quickly and sensitively.

## Ask, analyse, improve, repeat

Surveying students has given Trinity valuable insights into students' own experience of bullying.

Elizabeth continues: "The next thing I realised was that I hadn't asked the staff about their level of confidence in dealing with bullying. I think this is where many schools are falling down. It is wrong to assume that teachers and teaching assistants have the skills and confidence to deal with bullying."

Trinity now runs its bullying and safeguarding questionnaires – for students, parents and staff – annually.

One tip Elizabeth suggests to encourage participants to really think about their answers is to vary the questions each time the questionnaires are issued. "If you run the same questionnaire again and again, parents and children get blasé about it."

"We can now make a judgement on how happy and safe people feel: what parents think, what children think, what staff think," Elizabeth says. "Then we analyse how closely those three views come together, and whether there is an issue we need to address."

Often, it's about using data to make practical, day-to-day changes to keep students safer. "This is when the safeguarding team will bring to the attention of staff about information that we hold on an individual and might say: 'During the survey a student said they've been bullied in the playground. Would you please be extra vigilant and report any incidents straightaway'." This makes all staff aware of the potential issue so that the school can be more proactive in safeguarding all of its learners.

## Lessons learned

Data has allowed Trinity to identify the what, where, who, when and why about bullying in the school. But Elizabeth believes the big learning from the data is to see that bullying "needs to come under the banner of safeguarding. Children involved in bullying are not safe – either as victims or perpetrators."

Yet Trinity can see that the way it tackles bullying – being open, rigorous and quick to respond – is working, because it now has data to compare over time. As Georgina Moorcroft, deputy headteacher confirms: "We know our approach is successful because of the number of incidents we have coming through".