

Bullying and the Law

Information for headteachers, staff and governing bodies

Updated March 2014

Bullying and the law

This briefing provides information about bullying and the law for schools and the wider children's workforce in England.

What is bullying?

Bullying is behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. Bullying can take many forms (for instance, cyber-bullying via text messages or the internet), and is often motivated by prejudice against particular groups, for example on grounds of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or because a child is adopted or has caring responsibilities. It might be motivated by actual differences between children, or perceived differences. Stopping violence and ensuring immediate physical safety is obviously a school's first priority but emotional bullying can be more damaging than physical; teachers and schools have to make their own judgements about each specific case.

Many experts say that bullying involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This could involve perpetrators of bullying having control over the relationship which makes it difficult for those they bully to defend themselves. The imbalance of power can manifest itself in several ways. It may be physical, psychological (knowing what upsets someone), derive from an intellectual imbalance, or by having access to the support of a group, or the capacity to socially isolate. It can result in the intimidation of a person or persons through the threat of violence or by isolating them either physically or online.

(Preventing and Tackling Bullying - advice for headteachers, staff and governing bodies (March 2014).

There is no legal definition of bullying.

School duties

The school community has a duty of care to protect all its members and provide a safe, healthy environment, and these obligations are highlighted in law and guidance detailed in this briefing.

The Department for Education (DfE) has produced guidance for all schools including Academies and Free Schools which outlines its duties towards preventing and tackling bullying in schools:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying>

Schools behaviour/Anti-Bullying policy

[Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) states that maintained schools must have measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils. These measures should be part of the school's behaviour policy, which must be communicated to all pupils, school staff and parents.

The Head Teacher must follow through and adopt the policy and all students, parents and teachers should be notified of it once it has been decided. However, this policy is only applicable to state led schools. Private schools have greater autonomy over the issue.

Section 89 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006:

s89 Determination by head teacher of behaviour policy

(1) The head teacher of a relevant school must determine measures to be taken with a view to—

(a) promoting, among pupils, self-discipline and proper regard for authority,

(b) encouraging good behaviour and respect for others on the part of pupils and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils,

(c) securing that the standard of behaviour of pupils is acceptable,

(d) securing that pupils complete any tasks reasonably assigned to them in connection with their education, and

(e) otherwise regulating the conduct of pupils.

... ..

(6) The measures determined by the head teacher under subsection (1) must be publicised by him in the form of a written document as follows—

(a) he must make the measures generally known within the school and to parents of registered pupils at the school, and

(b) he must in particular, at least once in every school year, take steps to bring them to the attention of all such pupils and parents and all persons who work at the school (whether or not for payment).

Academies, Free schools and Independent schools

The [Independent School Standards Regulations 2010](#) state that the proprietor of an Academy or other independent school is required to ensure that an effective anti-bullying strategy is drawn up and implemented.

Bullying and Child Protection

A bullying incident should be addressed as a child protection issue under the [Children Act 1989](#) when there is 'reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm'¹. These concerns must be reported to the local authority's children's social services.

¹ Children Act 1989 – Part V, s47(1)(b)

Discrimination – The Equality Act 2010

It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of:

- age
- being or becoming a transsexual person
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or having a child
- disability
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion, belief or lack of religion/belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

These are called 'protected characteristics'. You're protected from discrimination in these situations:

- at work
- **in education**
- as a consumer
- when using public services
- when buying or renting property
- as a member or guest of a private club or association

You are legally protected from discrimination by the [Equality Act 2010](#). You're also protected from discrimination if:

- you're associated with someone who has a protected characteristic, eg a sibling or friend
- you've complained about discrimination or supported someone else's claim

Schools **must** follow the Equality Act 2010. This means staff must act to prevent discrimination, harassment and victimisation within the school. If you think a child is being harassed in school you **must** act to prevent it.

You can find guidance on the Equality Act 2010 for schools here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-2010-advice-for-schools>

Bullying outside of school

[The Department for Education](#) released the following statement in regards to bullying outside of school premises:

“Head teachers have the legal power to make sure pupils behave outside of school premises (state schools only). This includes bullying that happens anywhere off the school premises, eg on public transport or in a town centre.”

Through [Section 89 clause 5 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) a statutory power has been accredited to head-teachers to discipline their students for any bullying incidents outside of school “to such an extent that is reasonable.”

DfE’s Preventing and Tackling Bullying guidance (page 6) says about schools duties to tackle bullying outside of schools:

“This can relate to any bullying incidents occurring anywhere off the school premises, such as on school or public transport, outside the local shops, or in a town or village centre.

Where bullying outside school is reported to school staff, it should be investigated and acted on. The headteacher should also consider whether it is appropriate to notify the police or anti-social behaviour coordinator in their local authority of the action taken against a pupil. If the misbehaviour could be criminal or poses a serious threat to a member of the public, the police should always be informed.

In all cases of misbehaviour or bullying the teacher can only discipline the pupil on school premises or elsewhere when the pupil is under the lawful control of the staff member. More detailed advice on teachers’ powers to discipline, including their power to punish pupils for misbehaviour that occurs outside school, is included in [‘Behaviour and discipline in schools – advice for headteachers and school staff’](#).”

Bullying on school transport

The above section ‘Bullying outside of school’ applies on school transport as well. [The Safe to Learn Department for Children’s Schools and Families \(DCSF\) guidance](#) on bullying on journeys gives more information to schools about preventing bullying on school transport.

Please note: the Safe to Learn guidance is no longer Government guidance but can be helpful to schools

Schools ability to search a student’s property

Section 85 clause 3A of the [Education Act 2011](#) states that a school doesn’t need the consent of the child in question if they believe “that there is a risk that serious harm will be caused to a person if the search is not carried out as a matter of urgency”. For example if the child is carrying prohibited items into school property. Prohibited items include; alcohol; drugs; weapons; tobacco or any pornographic images.

All these items can be confiscated without question. Any search that may take place must have two members of staff present; the searcher and the witness and ideally both would be of the same sex as the perpetrator. Any complaints by parents regarding the search must be made to the head teacher and ask for a copy of the complaints procedure.

Cyberbullying and the law

As stated above, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 gives the Head Teacher the power, 'to such an extent that is reasonable' The Education and Inspections Act 2006 – Part 7, s89(5), to regulate the conduct of pupils when they are offsite. This power is very relevant to cyberbullying because much cyberbullying does take place out of school, partly because the technology used in cyberbullying, such as social networking services and smartphones, may be restricted in schools. However, the impact of cyberbullying can affect the lives and school lives of young people, so what takes place offsite has a direct impact onsite.

The Education Act 2011 gives additional powers to schools – screening, searching and confiscation, including of electronic devices. There is DfE advice on this in "[Screening, searching and confiscation – Advice for Head Teachers, staff and governing bodies](#)". This even includes the power to delete certain content. There are conditions to the use of all of these powers, so the DfE Guidance should be referred to.

Some cyberbullying activities could be criminal offences under a range of different laws, including the [Malicious Communications Act 1988](#) and the [Protection from Harassment Act 1997](#). There have been some instances of such prosecutions in the UK.

The Malicious Communications Act of 1988 makes it an offence for:

- 1) Any person who sends to another person—
 - (a) a letter, electronic communication or article of any description which conveys—
 - (i) a message which is indecent or grossly offensive;
 - (ii) a threat; or
 - (iii) information which is false and known or believed to be false by the sender; or
 - (b) any article or electronic communication which is, in whole or part, of an indecent or grossly offensive nature,

is guilty of an offence if his purpose, or one of his purposes, in sending it is that it should, so far as falling within paragraph (a) or (b) above, cause distress or anxiety to the recipient or to any other person to whom he intends that it or its contents or nature should be communicated.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988 - s1(1)

If you are worried that activity may be illegal it is important that you speak to the Police.

Hate crimes and incidents

Hate crime

A hate crime is any occurrence that is perceived by the victim, or any other person to be one of the following:

- racist
- homophobic
- transphobic (discrimination against transsexual or transgender people)

Or because of a person's:

- religion
- beliefs
- gender identity or
- disability

A hate crime is not only limited to a personal attack. Name calling, violence, property attacks such as graffiti, verbal attacks, abusive messages either by phone, mail or via the internet can also be seen as hate crimes. No hate crime is too minor to report to the police, they will record all incidents brought to their attention whether or not a crime has been committed.

Hate incident

A hate incident is any incident, which may or may not be a crime, that the victim or any other person perceives to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards any aspect of a person's identity.

You can contact Stop Hate UK if you think that a child or young person in your school might have been victim of a hate crime/incident. Their website is: <http://www.stophateuk.org/> or you can call 0800 138 1625.

Bullying and the police

No matter how bad bullying can seem, many incidents of bullying are not actually crimes, and therefore might not be a matter for the police. The best people to deal with them are parents, teachers, other responsible adults and young people themselves.

But some types of bullying are illegal and should be reported to the police. This includes bullying that involves:

- violence or assault
- theft
- harassment and intimidation over a period of time including calling someone names or threatening them, making abusive phone calls, and sending abusive emails or text messages (one incident is not normally enough to get a conviction)
- anything involving hate crimes (see above)

As stated above some incidents of bullying may be a 'hate crime' but 'hate crime' is not a criminal offence in and of itself.

Criminal law

Although bullying in itself is not a specific criminal offence in the UK, it is important to bear in mind that some types of harassing or threatening behaviour – or communications – could be a criminal offence, for example under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Malicious Communications Act 1988, the Communications Act 2003, and the Public Order Act 1986.

If school staff feel that an offence may have been committed they should seek assistance from the police.

The information in this document was taken from a briefing paper by Anti-Bullying Alliance SEN & Disability – Bullying and the Law : SEN and / or disabilities



