

Research Article by Sue Young

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Evaluation of the support group approach

Over the 2-year period, in 55 cases (over 70 per cent of referrals), the support group approach was used, usually by the SENSS anti-bullying co-ordinator or occasionally by the school. These referrals are predominantly from primary schools - 51 primary and four secondary. The approach has been successful in the great majority of cases - to be precise, the bullying stopped completely or the victim no longer felt in need of support. Table 1 shows the results for primary school only, because this is where the weight of our experience is to date.

Table 1. Support group approach

Number of Cases 51

Not completed 1 Child excluded

Immediate success 40 (80%)

Successful 50 (100%)

Success delayed 7 (14%)

Limited success 3 (6%)

The cases have been further sub-divided in order to clarify the criteria by which they have been judged. 'Immediate success' is where, from the time the group was set up, the victim reported little or no difficulties, the support group agreed, and the parents of the victim (when involved) were happy that the bullying had stopped. Leaving aside the one case not able to be completed, 80 per cent of cases fell into this category. However, in a minority of cases, identified as 'success delayed' in the table, the victim was not entirely happy at the first review, or the support group thought things were not satisfactory. In these cases the situation improved over the following 3 to 5 weekly reviews, until it appeared to be stable with no bullying taking place. In a small minority of cases the victim continued to mention incidents that bothered him/her, although there had been considerable improvement. In these cases, identified as 'limited success' in the table, the intervention was monitored until there was stability at a 'tolerable' level for the victim but the victim was re-referred subsequently for being bullied by different pupils.

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Of the four cases in secondary school during the same period, two were immediate successes, one child did not return to school at all and one transferred to another school early during intervention. On this basis the support group approach appears to be an effective intervention at secondary level, and subsequent referrals continue to reinforce this view. When choosing the support group in a secondary school an additional check needs to be made whether there are members of the support group in every set or grouping to which the pupil belongs that he/she finds a problem.

The confidence of Maines and Robinson has been substantiated in our experience, so much so that now SENSS advises the schools to adopt this approach, unless there are compelling and usually obvious reasons why it would not be appropriate.

Why does the support group approach work?

An approach so successful deserves to be better known and more widely used. Perhaps one of the reasons it appears not to be widely accepted is implicit in Smith and Sharp's review (1994), when they suggest that it is not known why it works. Maines and Robinson only begin to give any rationale.

Although Smith and Sharp (1994) draw attention to the No Blame Approach in the DfE anti-bullying pack for schools, it is with certain tentativeness. They suggest that this type of approach may be used in less serious cases of bullying (DfE, 1994, p 18-19). Their suggestion that the No Blame Approach needs independent verification also sounds a note of caution. Why are they so cautious in the light of available evidence? Trying to understand the causes of behavioural change is not always a 'common sense' pursuit. Despite knowing that a reprimand can in some circumstances reward disruptive pupils, it is still difficult to practice this in the classroom. It takes practice and considerable restraint for a teacher to avoid reinforcing misbehaviour. Teachers also often have difficulty rewarding a decrease in misbehaviour, thinking that it is somehow not right that a child is rewarded for behaviour that in other pupils is expected and taken for granted. Maines and Robinson (1992) indicate that there is a 'natural' desire to punish the bully and that it is often asked what the parents of the victim think of the strategy proposed, with the implication that they will be dissatisfied with a non-punitive response. In one of our referrals, teachers objected to the bullies being given any reward. No parent has ever objected - they are only too happy their nightmare has ceased. While there is no clear, rational explanation for the approach working, and where schools have tried to address the problem with little success, it does seem unbelievable that a relatively low-key approach will have any impact. If the strategy is not open to plausible explanation it is unlikely to gain widespread adoption.

However, we have turned to 'brief therapy' and social psychology, especially group psychology, to give us insights into why and how the strategy works. In the Kingston upon Hull Anti-Bullying project the original Maines and Robinson approach has been developed. The differences are small and we fully acknowledge the No Blame Approach as our starting point. However, it is believed that the following exposition demonstrates the changes are significant.

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Brief therapy

The support group approach can be viewed as an example of applied brief therapy. Brief therapy has been developed in the USA over the last 20 years in particular, and recently by practitioners in this country (Budman et al, 1992). It is recognised not only for its powerful effect in clinical settings but also for its application to situations such as in education. It is pre-eminently associated with de Shazer (1985; 1988).

Brief therapy originally developed from a mood of dissatisfaction with traditional psychoanalysis that tends to be long-term. Moreover, the number of sessions of therapy began to be limited by the health insurance available in the USA so that long-term therapy was only available to the rich. Reducing the number of sessions available for the therapist to work, initially thought of as a necessary evil, led to a realisation that better and more successful therapeutic sessions could be developed. It was also recognised that many clients only attended the first session of psychotherapy. In order to be effective, brief therapists took account of this and developed a concentrated structure of questions to move clients towards the solution, rather than concentrating on the feelings and experiences within the problem. When working to manipulate a system, small changes can lead to profound changes. Indeed, any changes in a system will inevitably lead to further change. Solving the problem, therefore, concerns making the small difference that makes all the difference, creating a virtuous instead of vicious circle (Wender, 1971). Brief therapy takes a direct route to a solution, eliciting from the client those crucial small differences that will bring about the necessary changes that solve the problem. From the beginning the therapist is positive, convincing and optimistic - the problem can be addressed and will be solved by focusing, for example, on what happens when the problem is not there. When the 'miracle' has happened (de Shazer, 1985; 1988), what will be going on? Brief therapy is solution, rather than problem focused; future rather than past-oriented. Several brief therapy techniques can be recognised in the support group approach.

For example, one of the apparently contradictory principles of brief therapy is that the solution has nothing to do with the problem. Indeed, there is no need to even know what the problem is to find a solution. Using the support group approach as outlined above, although we allow parents to tell their complaint in whatever detail they think necessary, it does not in fact matter what the details of the complaint are.

Equally the victim may be forthcoming or may be very reticent but again it does not matter, since the solution is independent of the problem. In order to use a solution-focused support group it is necessary only to find out the names of those in the child's social system that are involved in maintaining the problem. Although teachers are often anxious to say what they have done to address the problem, again it does not matter what they say, in the sense that it has no impact on the solution. In this way the support group is a 'skeleton key' (de Shazer, 1985), a solution that fits rather than matches, and is all the more powerful for that, because it can unlock a wide range of individual problem circumstances. Creating 'virtuous circles' relies on the

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suggestions from the group, to break the 'vicious circle' of the problem and initiate a process of continued change for the better.

As in brief therapy, the means to a solution are not found in the knowledge or expertise of the leader of the group or how well the staff understands the situation, or whether we actually know what has been going on but in the group members themselves. They make the suggestions of what they think will make the difference. The process changes perceptions of behaviour, creating new 'stories' for the

protagonists that enhance their own self-esteem and is, therefore, self-reinforcing of the change taking place. Added to this, the leader gives feedback of compliments in such a way that creates the likelihood that the action will be implemented - what is called 'cheering on change' (George et al, 1990).

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) were the first to recognise and provide models for applying brief therapy to classroom management of children with behaviour problems. They refer to their ideas as an 'ecosystemic' approach. As they put it, 'Sometimes these changes seemed to occur instantaneously, as if by magic' and, 'Since ecosystemic ideas are intended to help change problem situations instead of to diagnose or "treat" a particular type of problem, they can be used in a large number of very different problem situations in schools' (page xiv). Molnar and Lindquist do not however address a bullying problem in their many case studies (see also Rhodes and Ajmal, 1995- Durrant, 1993).

The support group approach to bullying is such an ecosystemic approach. It is powerful and effective but gentle - just as an anti-bullying response should be. In the best tradition of conflict resolution the strategy provides a win-win outcome. There is, of course, evidence that using a peer support group in the same manner could help children through a variety of difficulties. Newton et al (1996), for example, have recognised the power of the peer group that is empowered to intervene appropriately and effectively to support a classmate. The benefits to the members of the group themselves are enormous.

Social psychology

The reason the support group approach appears to work is not only because it is effective and immediate but also because the solution develops outside the direct influence of the teacher. It is the dynamics of the support group acting both as a group and as individuals in interaction with the victim that gives the strategy force. Maines and Robinson suggest that raising empathy for the victim of bullying is a key component of the No Blame Approach. Indeed, they concentrate on the feelings of the victim as an important part of the procedure. They suggest that relaying to the support group how the victim feels raises this empathy. However, we have come to concentrate less on the victim's feelings without jeopardising the success of the intervention. We do not need to relay any other information to the group other than that the victim is unhappy.

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Social psychologists have studied in depth how 'bystanders' react - what factors motivate people to help and also what may make people unwilling to intervene to support others. Looking at this research together with work on the psychology of groups provides insight into why anti-bullying support groups are so effective. The research informs us (Brewer and Crano, 1994; Deaux et al, 1993; Baron et al, 1992) that the factors below enhance the likelihood of help being given (all of them are present in the support group approach). Individuals are more likely to help when they:

- Have been asked to help and have agreed
- Know the need for action is unambiguous, they are not left in any doubt
- Have been given some responsibility to act
- Have individual responsibility
- Know that their action is appropriate
- Have witnessed harm even if they were not directly involved
- Have their empathy aroused
- Know that they will receive feedback of outcomes
- Have a specific assigned task
- Feel guilty.

In addition, the above research shows that working as part of a group enhances this pro-social affect because:

- Each knows their suggestion for action has been accepted
- Even if only one member helps initially, the others are likely to follow
- They have made their commitment to action 'public'
- Anonymity of any action is reduced
- Identifying with a successful group increases self-esteem
- Continuance of unhelpful behaviour becomes unacceptable to the group
- In an interdependent group, mutually beneficial behaviour is encouraged
- Commitments made during group discussion lead to high levels of co-operation
- Defection from a group goal is less likely when the group expects reward.

We can infer what is happening during intervention, even though the action is outside our direct observation. It can be suggested that the main purpose of bullying is not so much the effect it produces in the victim but rather its effect on the bystanders. The support group as a whole has a purpose that transcends any one member. For the group to be successful, the individuals depend not only on their own actions but also on other members of the group. Before a support group is formed it can be assumed that the individuals have mixed motives. For example, the friend may wish to help, the bully may wish to continue to bully. But the group as a whole is given the responsibility for helping. So the bully has to choose either to continue bullying, bolstering his/ her dominant position in the wider peer group, or

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stop bullying and thereby allow the support group to succeed and maintain a leading position.

In more general terms, people are aroused by the needs of others and then decide whether to intervene by weighing the costs and rewards of helping. If we look at the roles of the people involved in the bullying situation we can see how a support group approach can alter the balance so that the rewards for helping the victim outweigh the costs.

The costs of helping will differ for individuals depending on their former roles.

A bully will lose the excitement associated with aggression and may lose (or expect to lose) the peer group's recognition of their power over others. A bystander loses the excitement and arousal of watching bullying and risks becoming a target for the bully. A friend may just risk becoming a target him/herself.

All support group members participate in a range of rewards including

- Recognition that they belong to a successful group
- Freedom from various levels of guilt
- Feeling good about their own altruism
- The esteem of other group members or at least not rejection
- Recognition and reinforcement from a member of staff guiding the group.

Conclusion

One special educational needs co-ordinator, who was initially sceptical of the outcome, watched the process and declared it was magic. It sometimes appeared that way when I first used the strategy. However, with further experience the underlying processes at work have become clearer. The approach appears to work at varying levels and in a variety of ways, each complementing the other. These act as 'back-up' systems in case of failure of any one aspect or level, making the support group approach extremely powerful.

Aspects of social psychology help to explain why a support group approach works. An awareness of these factors helps develop practice that reinforces the power of the intervention. Moreover, recognising that the support group approach is an application of brief therapy also helps point the way to strengthening intervention by using further strategies from that field, such as using future-focused questions and the effective use of compliments.

It is intended that this independent corroboration and explanation of the rationale behind the support group approach will lead to effective practice being promoted to help reduce bullying problems in our schools.

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