

Workshop 6: Responding to bullying

An outline of the Method of Shared Concern

The Method of Shared Concern is a non-punitive method of dealing with bullying incidents aimed at empowering students who have contributed to the bullying, or who become aware of the bullying, to act to resolve the problem.

It involves a multistage process, beginning with individual interviews leading on to group meetings. It is assumed that the bullying is strongly influenced by the relationships the students have with each other.

According to Pikas, the originator of the Method, this intervention process can cause a shift in the group dynamics, and provide an environment in which the parties may engage in a negotiation process to bring about a peaceful and sustainable outcome.

It can be applied in a school under these conditions:

1. The principles and procedures of the Method (as explained below) are understood by staff members and its use has general support in the school community.
2. There is a staff member or members trained in the procedure to work through the Method in detail and follow the recommended procedure.
3. Cases chosen for its application are those which do not involve very severe incidents, such as serious assaults, or ones of low severity that can be dealt with less formally.
4. There is active participation by a group of students who have become involved in the problem.

In the following description of the procedure and rationale for the Method, those suspected of undertaking the bullying are referred to, for convenience, as 'the suspected bullies'. It is not intended to imply that the children so described possess some fixed quality that determines that they will invariably act in a bullying manner. On other occasions they may act differently and actually help those being victimised. The Method in fact aims at empowering them to become part of the solution to a problematic situation.

The person(s) who are being bullied are referred to as the 'Target(s)'. Similarly, it is not intended that children identified as being targeted by the bullies possess a fixed quality that determines that they will be victimised. At other times and in other contexts, they may be treated differently and may eventually become free of bullying or harassment from others. The person implementing the intervention is described as the 'practitioner.'

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How the Method is applied

The Method of Shared Concern involves the following stages.

A. Individuals involved in a bully/victim problem are identified.

Reliable information is needed in relation to:

- a) the person or persons being bullied by another individual or group
- b) the person or persons continually engaged in carrying out the bullying.

Information about what has been happening is ideally obtained through observations and/or receiving reports, rather than through someone talking directly with the Target. Sometimes, however, the child or parent may report the incident to a staff member. In such cases, the child may be at risk from the bullies and care needs to be taken to ensure their protection. The risk is reduced when it is made clear to all concerned that no punishment is intended.

B. A number of students are identified as likely to have taken part in the bullying, or to have supported it in some way.

Each student is seen in turn, starting (if known) with the likely ringleader. (Under some circumstances, if desired, other students aware of the problem – for example, bystanders – may be included, as they may sometimes play an important role in influencing the bullying.) It has become customary to differentiate between the different roles bystanders may play, as suggested by Salmivalli (1999).

The interview must take place in private and without interruptions. The meeting begins with the interviewer inviting the student to sit in a chair opposite (without an intervening desk) and waiting for eye contact before the interaction begins. At these meetings with individual students, it is important not to make any accusations.

The practitioner first explains their role – to help children feel safe at school – then points out that it has been noticed that a particular student has been having a hard time at school with other students. The practitioner describes what has been discovered about the plight of this student, for example, being upset, isolated or staying away from school. Once the concerns of the practitioner have been clearly – and sincerely – conveyed, the student is asked to say what he or she has noticed or knows about the situation.

As soon as the student has acknowledged some awareness (not guilt) relating to what has been happening, they are asked directly what can be done to help improve matters. Note that the interviewer is not trying to 'get to the bottom of the matter' and apportion blame, but to produce a constructive response that will help to change the situation.

Commonly, suggestions are made about what can be done by the student. But if they are not, the practitioner may make suggestions, ones that are not difficult to carry out. Strong approval is expressed for any constructive proposals; then another meeting (at an agreed time) is arranged to see how things have gone. Importantly, at this meeting no threats are made nor any warnings.

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given. The remaining students in the group are seen, again individually, and the procedure repeated.

Example of a possible interaction between the practitioner and a suspected bully

Phase 1

Practitioner (P): I hear that Tom [the Target] has been having a hard time at school. I am feeling concerned about him. [P mentions a few things that suggest he has been having a hard time, then continues...] I gather that you know Tom. [P waits for acknowledgement.] I'd like you to help me to understand what has been happening to him. What have you noticed about him lately?

Suspected bully (SB): [long pause; P waits] Well, he does sometimes seem a bit down. Some kids have been teasing him. Just having fun. Nothing big.

P: Oh, so it does seem that things aren't so good for him right now.

SB: I suppose so.

Phase 2: This can begin as soon as there is any acknowledgment that the situation for Tom is not good.

P: I am wondering if you can think of anything that could make things a bit better for Tom.

SB: [long pause] Well, I suppose I could stop making fun of him – like calling him names.

P: [enthusiastically – not grudgingly] That would be excellent. So you are going to stop teasing him. That's a good start. Now let's meet again in a couple of days' time and see how things are going. Thank you for coming and talking to me to help the 14 situation for Tom. I will see you again soon. [P makes sure to negotiate with the student precisely when and where they will meet.]

C. The Target is interviewed.

The targeted person (T) is seen after all the SBs have been interviewed.

P begins by explaining their role and asks how things are going, expressing concern, sympathy and support over what has been happening. It is important that a trusting relationship is developed. However, questions need to be asked to find out whether T has been doing something to bring on the bullying – that is, by acting as a provocative victim. Importantly, no blame should be directed at the student. This line of questioning must be done sensitively. Often the victim is wholly innocent.

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P discloses that they have actually talked with the SBs individually and there has been an undertaking to do some things to improve the situation. T is asked to look out for signs of change. P arranges to meet again with T to see how things develop.

D. Several days later, follow-up meetings are held with individual bullies (as previously arranged).

The aim here is to ascertain whether the SBs have carried out actions, as promised, to improve the situation. Only when P is satisfied that progress is being made can a meeting be convened with the whole group of SBs.

E. At the group meeting of Suspected Bullies, each member is asked to say what they have done to try to improve the situation.

This commonly has the effect of promoting further positive social interactions with T. It is usually possible to:

- a) compliment members on the progress that has been made
- b) 'fall in with' (or elicit) a suggestion from members of the group that T be invited to join them for a last meeting to finally resolve the problem.

P should bear in mind that sometimes the group members may believe that T has been, in some ways, provocative or unreasonable, and concessions or adjustments may be required of T. It is therefore sensible to discuss any reservations that the SBs may have about how to relate to T, and to help them formulate a plan or proposal to put to T. P may then ask each member of the group what they are prepared to say at the final meeting. Such preparation of the group for this meeting is essential.

F. At a brief meeting with the Target, he or she can normally be induced to join the group for a final meeting, with assurances that progress can be made at the meeting.

However, if T is not willing to come along, his or her feelings and decision must be respected.

G. At the meeting with the Suspected Bullies and the Target present, sometimes called the Summit Meeting, the students are enabled by the Practitioner to express their thoughts about how they wish to proceed to resolve the issue.

Typically, if the SBs have, in fact, experienced a sense of genuine concern about the target and have taken steps to improve relations, the meeting serves the purpose of confirming that the problem has been successfully addressed. P may nevertheless discuss with the students what they might do if there is a relapse – and emphasise the need to keep channels of communication open.

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There are occasions when each side harbours some resentment. This can occur when T has behaved provocatively and the 'bullies' want to see a change in T's behaviour. The SBs are given the opportunity to put forward their agreed proposal, as formulated with P's assistance at the previous meeting. (Some preparation for this meeting may also be carried out previously with T.) At this stage P plays the role of the mediator. Typically, adjustments take place on each side. The aim here is to help the students reach an acceptable agreement about how each will behave towards the other in future. This may (if deemed necessary) take the form of a written contract which everyone signs.

References

Based on *Applying the Method of Shared Concern in Australian schools: an evaluative study* by Ken Rigby and Coosje Griffiths

Found at <http://www.peersupport.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Method-Of-Shared-Concern-K-Rigby.pdf>