

# The Support Group Method

The Support Group Method, developed by Barbara Maines and George Robinson, was first outlined in *Educational Psychology in Practice* (1991) and published as a distance learning pack in 1992. The approach addresses bullying by forming a support group of 'bullies' and/or bystanders. Without apportioning blame, it uses a problem-solving approach, giving responsibility to the group to solve the problem and to report back at a subsequent review meeting.

When bullying has been observed or reported then The Support Group Method offers a simple seven-step procedure which can be used by a teacher or other facilitator.

The Support Group Method has been proven effective in a variety of establishments around the world.

## BULLYING – FACTS AND FIGURES

All schools are likely to have some problem with bullying at one time or another. Now all schools are required by law to have an anti-bullying policy, and to use it to reduce and prevent bullying. Many schools have already successfully done this.

### What is Bullying?

Bullying is the repeated and harmful behaviour used by a single bully or a group to establish dominance over one or more victim/target s. It is common and different from random acts of aggression because it is based on a continuing relationship between bully and victim/target.

Bullying in schools can include the following:

- Name calling and teasing;
- Threats and extortion;
- Physical violence;
- Damage to someone's belongings;
- Leaving pupils out of social activities deliberately and frequently;
- Spreading malicious rumours;
- Bullying by mobile phone text messages or email.

ChildLine reports that:

- From April 2003 to March 2004, the main problems children contacted them about were: **bullying (22% of calls)**; family issues (12%); physical abuse (11%); concern for others (8%); facts of life (8%); and sexual abuse (7%)
- Most children (63%) who called about bullying said that they were bullied in school

In a survey that it conducted through the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education in 2003, ChildLine found:

- Just over half of both primary (51%) and secondary school pupils (54%) thought that bullying was "a big problem" or "quite a problem" in their school;
- Just over half (51%) of Year 5 pupils reported that they had been bullied during the term, compared with just over a quarter (28%) of Year 8 pupils. Considerable variation was reported in the level of bullying between schools;
- Girls were almost as likely as boys to have been bullied in both age groups. In Year 8, a higher proportion of Black and Asian pupils (33%) reported that they had been bullied this term, compared with pupils of other ethnic groups (30%) or white pupils (26%).

**SOURCES:** DfES website on bullying [www.dfes.org.uk/bullying](http://www.dfes.org.uk/bullying);  
Childline [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

## **'BLAIR BULLIES ANTI-BULLYING ALLIANCE' 6 February 2006**

George Robinson and Barbara Maines, successful practitioners in helping schools to combat bullying, resigned their membership and walked out of a meeting of the Anti-Bullying Alliance in London today (Monday 6 February). It had been made clear that their contracts as regional co-ordinators for the Alliance in the south-west of England would not be renewed. This was as a result of direct intervention by the Prime Minister's office because of their advocacy of the Support Group method to bullying.

This approach favours non-punitive methods to stop bullying in schools. Individuals take responsibility for their actions in a group structure and although controversial, it has proved successful across the world.

The ABA's action was taken despite positive, independent evaluation of Barbara and George's work and indications to them throughout last year that their contracts would therefore be renewed. They were told that implicit threats had been made by the Prime Minister's office to Paul Ennals, chief executive of the National Children's Bureau, the agent of the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA).

He reported to the ABA that he had received repeated telephone calls, both at work and at home implying that if he renewed the contracts, the current funding from the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) of over £0.5m would not continue

George Robinson and Barbara Maines have been successful regional co-ordinators for 18 months and members of the Alliance since it began in 2002. "Our membership of the ABA is no longer possible," said Barbara. "We have witnessed an indefensible level of bullying, manipulation and intervention, from the highest level in Government directed towards an independent organisation. How can we accept a situation where public policy is being determined to suit the current Prime Minister's obsession with punishment for any situation, whatever the circumstances?"

Barbara added: "Not only is a democratic right at stake, but even more crucially, such actions are wholly irresponsible as they might undermine the confidence that professionals have established in using a wide range of effective measures to change behaviour and protect young people."

Despite their complete support for Barbara and George's position and all their previous work, the ABA was forced to accept Paul Ennals' decision as members felt that this was the only practical way of protecting both future funding and the work of the ABA itself.

George Robinson had also been a member of the ABA Advisory Group, its governing body, and was told that the Prime Minister was directly involved in the decision and that once he had made his position clear, everyone had to support it.

"But at what cost?" said George. "And on what evidence is the Prime Minister making his judgements? Right up until last month, the DfES guidelines to schools in England fully endorsed a range of strategies, including the support group method. No one has seen any evidence to suggest that this should change."

In 2002, the DfES issued an anti-bullying pack for schools – Bullying, Don't Suffer in Silence – which was based on current legislation, recent research and relevant experience. Independent evaluation of the pack with schools showed that it was commended for maintaining awareness of the issue, and for providing a range of strategies for tackling bullying.

"The available evidence suggests that the Support Group method has had some success," said Professor Peter Smith, Goldsmiths College, University of London and author of the independent evaluation.

"My real concern however is that there does not appear to be enough substantial research which can either support or condemn any of the main anti-bullying strategies. This is a major barrier to moving on all the arguments about the benefits of one strategy to another".

Barbara Maines and George Robinson agree that more research is needed. "We are pleased to be meeting Professor Al Aynsley Green, the Children's Commissioner for England soon," said Barbara.

"He is treating bullying as one of his key priorities. He knows of our work and in a recent publication comments on the possible dangers of using punishment to intervene effectively when bullying happens. For example, in the case of a student called Jo, her school took firm action, but this only displaced the bullying. In Jo's view it is empathy that changed the behaviour of the young person bullying her".

"We will be discussing with the Commissioner the need for a full evaluation of the current strategies used in schools," said Barbara Maines. "We hope that independent research to establish what works and what doesn't work, will prove conclusively that the support group method is successful and should be used with confidence to combat bullying in our schools."

## NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) was founded by NSPCC and National Children's Bureau in 2002. It brings together 65 organisations from the voluntary, public and private sector to work together to reduce bullying and create safer environments for children and young people. ABA is based at the National Children's Bureau. For more information, visit [www.anti-bullyingalliance.org](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org).
2. The Children's Commissioner published a short report in November 2005 – Journeys – Children and Young People talking about Bullying. This is available at: <http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org/journeys.htm>

### What is the Support Group Method

**To understand how the method works, it is probably easier to hear from someone who has had direct experience. The following is a real life case study.**

[View the seven-step approach](#)

#### **Stockdale Road Primary School Australia**

"Late last year I attended a Professional Development training day on the Support Group Method to Bullying. At the beginning of the day I became quite defensive as George and Barbara purposefully challenged us to think differently about our approach to dealing with bullying. As the day unfolded I began to agree with their premise that bullying (to an extent) is a normal part of human social behaviour. Any approach to dealing with it in schools should aim to stop bullying when it inevitably occurs, rather than to punish it.

Not surprisingly my first chance to use the method came on the following Monday when I got back to school. There was some ongoing victimization of a student in a group of friends.

I followed the method to the letter by first talking to the victim and finding out how she felt and what had happened to her. I asked her to draw or write down the way she felt, which she did very enthusiastically. I explained to her that I was not going to punish anyone, but that I would help to make the bullying stop.

I told her that I was going to talk to the bullies and would she mind if I showed them the drawing she had done. She said she was quite comfortable with me showing them one side of the page, but not the other. I assured her I would do as she requested.

At recess I met with the group responsible for the bullying, as well as two other girls that I had selected from the grade. I knew the latter were astute and had healthy social skills. I told the group that I needed some help to fix a problem for the victim. This is where things strayed from the videos we had seen on the PD day. As soon as I mentioned the victim's name, the girls in the friendship group folded their arms, began to snarl and put their side of the story.

I had to restrain myself from retaliating on the victim's behalf. Instead of defending her position, I made notes and said, "I will talk to her about that." I then continued to emphasise that no one was being blamed. We needed to find ways to help the victim with her problem.

Then I showed the group the victim's drawings. They touched a raw nerve. Instead of a guilty silence, the drawings drew floods of tears. Not for the victim's pain, but for their own. Two of the bullies related directly to the feelings represented in the drawings.

I later held individual meetings with the children who were upset. They explained the extreme difficulties that they faced in their family lives. Both were themselves victims in conflict torn homes. I listened intently to their stories and counselled them as best I could. I offered on-going support and talked about ways of managing their feelings.

As things hadn't gone completely to plan, I wondered how successful the outcomes would be.

To my surprise the victim and the perpetrators came to see me (separately) the following day with looks of relief and happiness on their faces. They expressed gratitude and appreciation for my help. The bullying stopped."

**Brian Strating  
Assistant Principal and Welfare Coordinator  
Gippsland, Australia**

## Frequently Asked Questions

The Support Group Method

### **Q: What is Bullying?**

A: Bullying is the repeated and harmful behaviour used by a single bully or a group to establish dominance over one or more victim/targets. It is common and different from random acts of aggression because it is based on a continuing relationship between bully and victim/target. It can include physical, verbal, emotional and social behaviours and increasingly arrives by text and email.

### **Q: What is the Support Group Method?**

A: It is a practical, solution-focused method for resolving the problem of bullying in our schools, by encouraging kind and supportive behaviours from a group of peers.

### **Q: Who created it?**

A: George Robinson and Barbara Maines started to work together in 1984 when George was the head of a special school in Bristol and Barbara was the educational psychologist to the school. The Support Group Approach was created in 1991 and published in Educational Psychology in Practice. It was then published again in 1992 as a distance learning pack.

### **Q: How widely is it used?**

A: Barbara and George have been developing and training colleagues in the method since 1991 in the UK, the rest of Europe and North America. It is also very popular in Australia and New Zealand.

### **Q: Why was it created?**

George and Barbara's shared belief in the importance of self-esteem and their rejection of traditional methods of behaviour management inspired them to develop the support group method.

The young people they had worked with had already experienced detentions, suspensions and other punitive interventions intended to change behaviour. The result, more often than not, was that they now believed themselves to be 'bad kids'. To change this George and Barbara introduced a programme of initiatives that included:

- celebrating success
- teaching appropriate behaviours
- differentiating expectations
- replacing punishments with restorative justice methods

### **Q: Wasn't the approach known as the "No Blame Approach"?**

A: Yes. We regret using a name that describes what the method does not do. The name is far too open to mis-interpretation and has caused a misunderstanding of how the method actually works. It has now been re-named the Support Group Method.

### **Q: How does it work?**

A: The seven-step process addresses bullying by forming a support group which includes the bully, friends of the victim, peers and/or bystanders, usually about eight young people. It does not include the victim who has already had an opportunity to talk about the problem with a trusted adult who will act as an advocate in the group meeting. Without apportioning blame, the facilitator encourages a problem-solving approach, giving responsibility to the group to solve the problem and to report back at a subsequent review meeting.

The method is a simple, structured process, which can be used by a teacher or other facilitator.

**Q: The process involves the victim of the bullying by expecting him/her to take part by producing a piece of writing or a picture to illustrate his/her unhappiness. He/she is not invited to take part in the open group discussion. Does the victim not feel penalised or excluded? Is the victim not frightened of opening up in this way?**

Sometimes s/he is anxious that things might get worse but when it is explained that the group will include some popular and friendly people and that they will not be punished the victim usually gains confidence. At all times the facilitator offers a contact point so that s/he can be reached if things get worse.

**Q: The approach assumes that the bully is prepared to be involved in the process. It also assumes that he/she already recognises that he/she has caused a problem AND is prepared to rectify it. Surely this is not the case in reality?**

All the participants know that they are behaving in a way that is hurtful, the bullies, colluders, observers. Often they are shocked to discover the extent of the suffering they have caused because the victim has tried to hide his/her pain. The

strength of this moment in the meeting lies in understanding the way the group works – leaders function with consent of the followers and that consent is withdrawn by the majority in the group. Usually the lead bully is also capable of empathy – often they were victims in another situation. Even if they do not change the friendship group is established around the victim to protect him/her in the future.

**Q: In a survey which listened to the views of children and young people about tackling bullying, 36% of pupils in Year 8 said they would like to be involved in deciding what to do about bullying that involved them personally\*. This still leaves over 60% of pupils who would be reluctant to be involved.**

What does this mean for the Support Group Approach which assumes that other will be prepared to engage willingly in the process?

\*DfES/ChildLine Summary Report: Tackling Bullying: Listening to the views of children and young people, by Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, 2003.

All schools teach a citizenship curriculum and require young people to learn to take responsibility for the safety and well-being of the whole community. If young people were asked whether they wanted to learn maths, some might say that they did not!

Once involved in the real process the young people recognise their empathic responses and the sense of justice they feel in putting things right. It has all the benefits of restorative justice programmes which also have a coercive element.

**Q: Action is ultimately left in the hands of the Group. “No written record is made – it is left as a matter of trust”. What happens if the Group – with the best intentions or not – take no action?**

It is recorded that these people took part in a group meeting and it is carefully followed up with the victim and with each individual to ensure that things are better.

**Q: What training does the teacher or facilitator have to run this approach? Is there any support for them during and after conducting such a process?**

The method works best when it is part of a whole school policy, where the school has taken part in a training programme and where certain staff are identified as having experience to share. Like any method, if the exact process is not followed it may lead to unexpected and less successful outcomes.

**Q: Is there any research evidence to support this strategy?**

We know that there is little evidence world-wide which properly evaluates the effectiveness of any anti-bullying strategies. It is interesting however that there is some good research evidence which supports the Support Group work.

[View the full article.](#)

**Q: Is the Support Group method a “soft” approach?**

A: We strongly refute that the requirement to change behaviour and act in an empathic, pro-social way is at all “soft”. All restorative methods require a significant emotional response in order to achieve the solution. Young people participating are required to act as responsible citizens and they are accountable at the follow-up meeting for the success of their actions.

**Q: What is your response to these common objections to the approach?**

We cannot use it because it will take too much time  
Evidence shows that this way of working takes less time than other investigative and sanction-based responses.

Parents won't accept the approach!  
Teachers and parents both want the same thing – they want the bullying to stop. At parent workshops, we have found that they are just as receptive as professional audiences.

**Q: What methods do our critics recommend?**

A: There are some people who are critical of our work but, apart from training the victims/targets to protect themselves, or even suggesting that it is alright for victims to hit the bullies (Michele Elliot 2005, Teachers TV), they do not seem to offer any advice on how to change the behaviour of the bullies – surely that is what we need in order to promote a safe and caring ethos.

## THE CASE FOR THE SUPPORT GROUP METHOD

### The UK Government View

#### Comments which highlight why a non-punitive approach is helpful

### The Current Evidence

#### **The UK Government View**

The UK Government view until very recently has been tolerant, if not supportive, of the Support Group Method.

In May 1999, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Charles Clarke, said:

“Our (the DfEE’s) role is to offer schools advice on tackling bullying. As their circumstances differ, we have no plans to recommend one single strategy for all schools; they need to decide which ones best meet their own pupils’ needs and circumstances.

I am aware of the benefits of the Support Group method in cases where bullying has occurred. In some circumstances, this strategy may be the answer to combating bullying, but in others a different approach may well be necessary and more effective. As you know, it is described in the Department’s anti-bullying pack and we have no plans to change this at present.”

#### **“2nd Edition of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) – “don’t suffer in silence” – Anti-Bullying Pack”**

This DfES support pack for schools in England was published in 1999 and evaluated in April 2003. The Approach was nearly not included in this second edition but at the insistence of Professor Peter Smith, Goldsmiths College, University of London, it was incorporated as the “Support Group” approach NOT as it had been known – the No Blame Approach. The then Minister for Education, David Blunkett had vetoed any mention of “No Blame”.

An evaluation of the Pack by Professor Smith found that:

- Schools were using a range of strategies to tackle bullying and to encourage pro-social behaviour. The most highly rated strategies were: circle time; active listening/counselling approaches; working with parents; improving the school grounds and cooperative group work (a good example of the Support Group Method).
- Schools generally felt that the problem of bullying had slightly decreased since getting the pack.
- The Support Group Method gained a relatively high rating (5-point scale and a rating of 3.5). It was used more in secondary schools than in Infant and Primary Schools.

Acceptance of the Support Group Method appears to have started to change over the summer of 2005. The Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly said in an interview with The Independent newspaper on 19 June:

“We want a zero-tolerance approach to disruptive behaviour, from the low-level back chat and mobile phone texting in the classroom, to bullying or violence. Schools must have clear and consistent boundaries for what is acceptable behaviour. Pupils need to know where the limits are and what the consequences will be.”

This continued with a parliamentary question in the House of Commons on 23 November 2005:



**Dan Norris** (Wansdyke) | [Hansard source](#)

This Friday, as part of anti-bullying week, Lib-Dem controlled Bristol city council will call on its teachers not to punish or blame pupils who bully other pupils. What message does the Prime Minister have for those who adopt a no-blame approach, which, in my view, is dangerous and reckless, does nothing for the victims and does nothing to make bullies change their behaviour?



**Tony Blair** (Ex-Prime Minister) | [Hansard source](#)

If what my hon. Friend says is correct about the [Liberal Democrats](#), then it is an extraordinary thing for even them to do and I am shocked by it. [Interruption.] To describe oneself as shocked by the [Liberal Democrats](#) is perhaps an oxymoron.

I profoundly disagree with the position taken by the council. Bullying should be punished. Children who bully must be made to understand the harm that they have been doing. New sanctions are available. I am pleased that in the schools [White Paper](#) we are giving teachers an unambiguous right to discipline. It is absolutely necessary, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work on that serious problem.

A written question was tabled on 29 November:



**Dan Norris** (Wansdyke) | [Hansard source](#)

To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills

(1) what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of different approaches to tackling bullying in schools; and if she will make a statement;

(2) what assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of the no blame approach to tackling school bullying; and if she will make a statement.



**Jacqui Smith** (Minister of State (Schools and 14-19 Learners), Department for Education and Skills) | [Hansard source](#)

Our guidance to schools on tackling bullying "Don't Suffer in Silence" has been externally evaluated by researchers at Goldsmith's college, [University of London](#). The results, though based on a fairly low response rate from schools, show that the schools found that the pack met their expectations and helped in drawing up their anti-bullying policies.

This evaluation included research into the perceived success of the anti-bullying strategies and interventions recommended in the guidance. Schools generally reported a high level of satisfaction with the interventions they had used. I have placed a copy of the research brief for this project in the Library.

The key feature of the 'No Blame' approach, is that it adopts an explicit stance of discouraging punishment as a response to bullying. The Department does not support this stance and neither does the Anti-Bullying Alliance. Our guidance is clear that support and mediation strategies to change behaviour can, and should, be used in tandem with sanctions where appropriate. We are reviewing the guidance to make this even more explicit.

**As we do not promote the 'No Blame' approach for use in schools, we have not undertaken any assessment of its effectiveness.**

### Comments which highlight why a non-punitive approach is helpful ...

Cherie Booth QC

In her summary at a ChildLine conference in November 2001, Cherie Booth supported the need to involve young people in the solution to bullying. She said:

"Bullying is something that isn't going to go away but which does need to be managed in a holistic way, which recognises both the development of children and the empowerment of children to take control of their lives, in order to build a better school community.

"And if we can do that in a school and turn out citizens who really do have skills of coping and managing conflict, then what better society could we build?"

David Bell, HM Chief Inspector

"Schools that motivate and involve pupils so that their behaviour does not get in the way of their learning have common characteristics ... They also respond to pupils' concerns about bullying, and involve pupils in supporting each other through mentoring, buddy and prefect systems,"

(Source: The Independent, 19 June 2005)

Sir Alan Steer, headteacher of Seven Kings High School in Ilford, East London and chairman of the Government's new task force on school discipline.

"We shouldn't demonise pupils. If we start giving the message that we hate our young, what message are we going to get back from them?"

(Source: The Independent, 19 June 2005)

## **The Current Evidence**

There is increasing evidence that putting children at the heart of finding the solutions to bullying is one of the most successful ways to stopping it.

### ***Tackling Bullying: Listening to the views of children and young people***

**By Christine Oliver and Mano Candappa**

**Thomas Coram Research Unit**

**Institute of Education 2003**

In conclusion, the report finds that it is important:

- To develop anti-bullying strategies that start with pupils' experiences of bullying, and which take into account the consequences of 'telling' for children and young people;
- To provide accessible sources of confidential advice and support;
- To adopt a sustained and multi-modal approach to bullying in recognition of children's perceptions that some courses of action work some of the time, and that there are no sure or single solutions to the problem of bullying.

### **S. Young (1998)**

**The (No Blame) Support Group Method to bullying in schools,  
Educational Psychology in Practice, 14, 32-39.**

This was an independent evaluation carried out in the Kingston upon Hull Special Educational Needs Support Service (SENS). Over a two-year period, in 80% of primary school cases treated through the modified No Blame Approach there was an immediate success.

In 14% of cases there was a delay, but after 3 to 5 weekly reviews, the bullying stopped or the victims reported that they no longer needed the support group.

In only 6% of cases did the victim report that the bullying continued, or that he/she was bullied by different pupils. There was a similar outcome in secondary school referrals.

### **S. Young & G. Holdorf (2003)**

**Using solution-focused brief therapy in individual referrals for bullying.  
Educational Psychology in Practice, 19, 271-282.**

This was a study of solution based brief therapy as an intervention with individual Pupils - these being 118 pupil referrals from both primary and secondary schools. The authors found this procedure more effective in certain cases, but they did use the Support Group Method in 12 cases. 11 of them were successful.

### **Professor Peter Smith**

**Head, Unit for School and Family Studies**

**Department of Psychology**

**Goldsmiths College, University of London**

**and independent evaluator of the Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Pack says:**

"These reports suggest a high success rate. The quality of the reports is on a par with most of the better research literature available on anti-bullying work. My main reservation is the very high success rates achieved (around 90%).

Given the persistence of bullying in our schools, it is clear there is no 'magic wand' – not yet, anyway. Claims for success rates above 80% - whether for Support Group or for bully courts, or whatever – leave me suspecting either that the research is flawed in some way (e.g. social desirability affected responses), or, that the findings are not generalisable because this was a special sample group in some way.

If we had truly generalisable success rates of over 80%, then our problems really would be nearly over – but I doubt we are out of a job yet.

**In summary, what evidence there is, is supportive of the Support Group method – but, there is definitely a need for more research, carried out independently in 'normal' schools that are using the approach."**

### **Bullying in Secondary Schools**

**What it looks like and how to manage it**

**By Keith Sullivan, Mark Cleary and Ginny Sullivan**

**(First published in 2004)**

A whole chapter is dedicated to the success of the Support Group Method.

**See Chapter 15:** Changing the Social Dynamic: The No Blame Approach

### **What are other people saying?**

#### ***On George and Barbara's Support Group Method***

#### **Professor Al Aynsley-Green, Childrens' Commissioner for England**

"Bullying is an incredibly emotive issue which polarises opinion, particularly for those who wish to have punishment and control and those that may be seen to be liberalist. My view is quite explicit. There is no one size which fits every experience of bullying.

... Bullying is not just an issue for children, it is very relevant to the adult world. Two million adults were described by the TUC as having being bullied in the first six months of 2005. On the issue of no blame, I repeat there is no one size fits all. There is a temptation to have a knee jerk reaction, that we should punish the bully. From my contact with bullies, many of them have been bullied themselves and come from very troubled backgrounds. I am not using that as an excuse for their behaviour, but we need to look at ways of approaching this.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has been charged with being a no blame organisation, which I do not think it is. What I am asking for is serious thought to be applied to each individual case of bullying, looking at the circumstances and finding the best ways

I ask for a more structured debate about this than just polarised "punish the bullies". That is not the answer to every issue."

*(From his oral evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee on 5 December 2005 ).*

<http://www.childrenscommissioner.org/>

#### **Edward Davey MP Liberal Democrat Shadow Education Secretary**

Responding to the Prime Minister's criticism of Bristol City Council's anti-bullying policies, Edward Davey said on 23 November 2005:

" Bristol 's anti-bullying strategy has involved the enthusiastic support of Bristol schools, businesses and local football teams. It is also strongly backed by local Labour MP, Kerry McCarthy.

"The document being launched mentions the "No Blame" approach briefly and only as one of many available approaches. This directly follows the guidance of Mr. Blair's government's own "anti-bullying pack" on the Department for Education website.

"The Prime Minister owes the people of Bristol an apology. His own government's record on school discipline is poor. I'd encourage him to make the time to attend Bristol's anti-bullying initiative on Friday and to learn from a serious, inclusive and well-planned strategy to protect our children from bullying, rather than scoring cheap political points."

#### **Regional Coordinator Anti-Bullying Alliance**

The No Blame approach, which has been the subject of criticism from certain people, is one of many different strategies I use successfully when dealing with bullying cases, along with other methods. The strength of the ABA is the rich mixture of different professionals and the many different working practices available. This sharing of good practice is so useful and effective.

Val McFarlane  
Regional Coordinator  
Anti-Bullying Alliance

<http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org/index.htm>

**Young Voice**  
**The national charity that makes young people's views count**

We admire the work of George Robinson and Barbara Maines in developing new ways of thinking about resolving bullying and conflict. They have led the way to a re-think of how we teach values and behaviour. Their contribution to anti bullying work is enormous.

Adrienne Katz  
Young Voice - The national charity that makes young people's views count  
Member of the Anti Bullying Alliance and Regional Coordinator for the West Midlands.

<http://www.young-voice.org/>

**National Centre for Restorative Justice in Education, UK**

I am concerned about the proposed new, more punitive, anti-bullying policy in schools in England. Punishment may have its place but it can also be ineffective and dangerous.

It does not make young people who bully accountable before the people who have been affected - those victimised themselves, their parents, their own family, and the wider school community.

It does not teach an alternative way of behaving, or answer any of the many questions that all involved need answering to feel safe, better about themselves and move on. It can be dangerous because it does nothing to repair relationships between those bullying and those bullied – and indeed they make them worse. Young people who bully, and their friends, often seek revenge unless they feel fairly treated by the school.

A restorative meeting, which in serious cases should involve not just the young people but their families/carers as well, offers a unique space for those who have been bullied to hear, at first hand, how much pain and distress they have caused to all present.

They then get the chance to acknowledge this, express genuine remorse and make amends. Evidence nationally suggests that this experience can make a dramatic difference in bullying situations, healing relationships, restoring self-esteem, re-building respect and confidence on all sides.

A restorative response is not a 'no-blame' response. It is a 'full accountability /damage repair' response – unlike punishment.

We must remember that punishment can be dangerous and ineffective. Let it be a very last resort if all else fails – but let us be aware of the potential damaging consequences to everyone involved.

**Belinda Hopkins**  
**Director**  
**Transforming Conflict**  
**National Centre for Restorative Justice in Education**  
**Mortimer**  
**UK**

[www.transformingconflict.org](http://www.transformingconflict.org)

**Fachstelle fuer schwierige Schulstuationen**  
**Schulhaus Moosmatt,**  
**Urdorf,**  
**Switzerland**

We've run countless training sessions for teachers on "No Blame" in the German-speaking Swiss cantons since 1998. For a few years now, the method has been spreading in Germany.

On the basis of documented case studies and my own professional practice, I can attest to the success of the approach as one element of systematic anti-bullying provisions in schools.

In the context of a school in which clear behavioural expectations are positively expressed, where pupils are encouraged to report any bullying episodes (either to their parents or their teachers) and when pupils and parents know that the teachers will respond immediately and consistently to such incidents, the "No Blame" Support Group Approach has been found to be very effective, very quickly.

The Swiss approach is to find solutions through dialogue. The No Blame Support Group Approach fits our culture.

We find that the victims are much more interested in having the bullying stopped than the bullies punished. The victims aren't so interested in the bullies; they just want to feel better and be able to concentrate on their school work and not be isolated during the school breaks or threatened on the way home.

The key to the method, as I see it, is to give those pupils involved in the bullying a chance to change their behaviour. The method is about assuming responsibility for one's actions.

When we as adults model the behaviour that we expect from the students (respect, dignity, self-responsibility), we are normally rewarded with responses in kind.

I have never yet experienced or heard of a No Blame intervention which has resulted in the situation getting worse for the victim. With a week or two, we can see whether we are having an effect, and, if not, then we move to another form of intervention.

I tell the victims that I work with that the intervention has a 90% chance of success. I tell them that if we are unlucky and the pupil is one of the 10%, then we will continue to find new solutions that will lead to a cessation of the bullying. We won't stop until the bullying stops. We always find a solution.

**Christopher Szaday**

**Fachstelle fuer schwierige Schulsituationen  
Schulhaus Moosmatt  
Urdorf  
Switzerland**

**William Colenso College  
New Zealand**

"For the last ten years we have been using the Maines/Robinson (No Blame) Support Group Method to address bullying issues in our school. Our adoption of the method came after extensive research and experience in attempting to deal with bullying behaviour in our college.

The approach is not only the most effective intervention method we have come across (i.e. it works), but it provides the participants with invaluable life-skills in solving relationship conflicts and provides real life opportunities for young people to intervene to challenge anti-social behaviour and support victims.

I am horrified that this programme is under attack."

Mark Cleary  
Principal,  
William Colenso College , (Te Kāreti o Wiremu Koroneho),  
New Zealand

[www.colenso.school.nz](http://www.colenso.school.nz)

**Stockdale Road Primary School  
Australia**

Late last year I attended a Professional Development training day on the (No Blame) Support Group Method to Bullying. At the beginning of the day I became quite defensive as George and Barbara purposefully challenged us to think differently about our approach to dealing with bullying. As the day unfolded I began to agree with their premise that bullying (to an extent) is a normal part of human social behaviour. Any approach to dealing with it in schools should aim to stop bullying when it inevitably occurs, rather than to punish it.

Not surprisingly my first chance to use the method came on the following Monday when I got back to school. There was some ongoing victimization of a student in a group of friends.

I followed the method to the letter by first talking to the victim and finding out how she felt and what had happened to her. I asked her to draw or write down the way she felt, which she did very enthusiastically. I explained to her that I was not going to punish anyone, but that I would help to make the bullying stop.

I told her that I was going to talk to the bullies and would she mind if I showed them the drawing she had done. She said she was quite comfortable with me showing them one side of the page, but not the other. I assured her I would do as she requested.

At recess I met with the group responsible for the bullying, as well as two other girls that I had selected from the grade. I knew the latter were astute and had healthy social skills. I told the group that I needed some help to fix a problem for the victim. This is where things strayed from the videos we had seen on the PD day. As soon as I mentioned the victim's name, the girls in the friendship group folded their arms, began to snarl and put their side of the story.

I had to restrain myself from retaliating on the victim's behalf. Instead of defending her position, I made notes and said, "I will talk to her about that." I then continued to emphasize that no one was being blamed. We needed to find ways to help the victim with her problem.

Then I showed the group the victim's drawings. They touched a raw nerve. Instead of a guilty silence, the drawings drew floods of tears. Not for the victim's pain, but for their own. Two of the bullies related directly to the feelings represented in the drawings.

I later held individual meetings with the children who were upset. They explained the extreme difficulties that they faced in their family lives. Both were themselves victims in conflict torn homes. I listened intently to their stories and counselled them as best I could. I offered on-going support and talked about ways of managing their feelings.

As things hadn't gone completely to plan, I wondered how successful the outcomes would be.

To my surprise the victim and the perpetrators came to see me (separately) the following day with looks of relief and happiness on their faces. They expressed gratitude and appreciation for my help. The bullying stopped.

Brian Strating  
Assistant Principal and Welfare Coordinator  
Gippsland , Australia

**Thomas Brown**  
**National Anti-Bullying Awareness Speaker**  
**School Violence and Bullying Film Creator**  
**The United States of America**

Regarding the 'no-blame' approach to dealing with school bullying...it's not always easy for people to understand how effective it can actually be. I have shared the no-blame concept at every parent and teacher group I've ever been at, and the results are mixed. But thank goodness, there is always one wonderful teacher who stands up and shares a personal story that completely legitimizes the 'no blame' concept.

Regarding my program, I would get absolutely nowhere if I even 'hinted' at blaming or pointing out bullies in my audience or in general terms.

I always stress that it is 'bullying' that is the problem, not bullies. I stand on the belief that 95% of our school bullies can be reached, provided we give them the tools.

It is not 'bullies' that are our big problem anyway, it is the notion that bullying is 'just a part of growing up' or a 'rite of passage' that has been handed down over the years.

It is the fact that bullying is often made 'light of' in popular children's animated programs and feature films, as well as on more general audience sitcoms.

If anyone is responsible for the epidemic that the school bullying problem ultimately is, it is adult ignorance about the severity of the bullying problem and its affects, on not only the emotional stability of children, but the learning process in general. This kind of attitude is inexcusable when so many child suicides and school shootings were directly caused by school bullying.

By using the 'no blame' concept in my work with children, I don't put the actual bullies in the audience on the defense, because it is 'bullying' that is my focus, rather than children acting out with bullying behavior. Because of that strategy, they are more open-minded to my message, and some, whether we want to believe it or not, actually listen with their heart and mind to the extent that there is change for the good.

A great personal story of mine is the school administrator from Pennsylvania who stopped me before I was to leave for the airport. He was so excited to tell me that after my morning program, a girl who was widely known as one of the worst bullies in the school...had gone around and apologized to various girls and smaller boys that she had picked on.

It is because of the 'no blame' ideals that a miracle was experienced in that school. The principal came right out and told me that he had never seen anything like that happen in his years of being an educator. He added that it was because of my program that the change came about in that girl; a 'bully' that he and his staff had given up on.

But it wasn't anything 'I' did that turned this girl around. It is because she listened when I spoke, and did not turn me off. And why? Because I did not make her out to be a bad person. My focus was on the 'problem' and not bullies.

Imagine that girl in a 'zero tolerance' situation in which bullying was treated like some kind of throw-away problem, in that you get rid of the 'problem' (aka the child) and then all is supposedly well. Would that solve the problem? Would that help her? No. She would return the same antagonist she always was...and I dare say that things would be even worse for her victims. In short, absolutely nothing would have been accomplished by 'placing blame' or using only 'punishment' as the answer.

A father of a bullied boy who took his own life told me that bullying should be treated like a crime, and that schools should post large posters that state exactly that.

I told him then, and I mean it now, I don't want kids to stop bullying because they will 'get in trouble.' I want them to stop because they come to realize that it is unfair and wrong to treat someone in a way that you would not want to be treated yourself.

And the only way to even 'have a chance' of getting a bully to turn their attitude around, is by helping them understand how much it hurts to be bullied in the first place, by using non-threatening tools and awareness, and certainly not by punishing them with suspension or expulsion...or punishing their parents.

Punishment is too easy...too convenient...and it NEVER does any good. For fifteen year, I've been incorporating the no-blame concept in my films and in my school programs, and I will continue to do so....simply because IT WORKS.

Thomas Brown  
The Broken Toy Project  
LionHeart Multimedia Productions  
National Anti-Bullying Awareness Speaker  
School Violence and Bullying Film Creator  
The United States of America

### ***On the role of George and Barbara in the ABA ...***

#### **Members of the Anti-Bullying Alliance**

As members of the Anti Bullying Alliance we regret the decision by the chief executive of the NCB not to renew the contracts for George Robinson and Barbara Maines in the South West. The quality of the work they have done since their appointment in 2004 has not been in question. As originators of the No Blame, Support Group Approach they have made a valuable contribution to the range of approaches in this field and should not suffer discrimination for this reason.

Anita Compton  
London Regional Co-ordinator

Val McFarlane  
North East Regional Co-ordinator

Melanie Goddard  
Andy Ritchie  
North West Regional Coordinator

Peter Smith  
Member of the ABA Advisory Group

#### **ChildLine in Partnership with Schools UK**

As a UK organisation that has people at grass roots in all regions, I can absolutely confirm that the work in the SW has always been a casebook example of how partnership work can and should happen, to the benefit of all concerned.

Lindsay Gilbert  
Head of CHIPS UK (Childline in Partnership with Schools)  
ChildLine

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

#### **South-West Group, Anti-Bullying Alliance**

We have been very happy with the role George Robinson and Barbara Maines have played. They have valuable experience and a broad understanding of the national and local picture. The group is currently in the middle of developing an agreed SW Accreditation Scheme that we feel will have a positive impact on reducing bullying in schools in the SW. We have dates agreed for future meetings.

With George and Barbara's chairmanship we have produced anti-bullying guidance for the region in a very short time span. Both George and Barbara have, as facilitators, encouraged the dissemination and development of a broad spectrum of good practice.

We feel that one of the strengths of this group has been not only to support work in our LEA's for the national Anti-Bullying Week as well as local initiatives but through George and Barbara's extensive knowledge and contacts they have linked us in with good practice in other parts of the country.

This statement represents the personal views of the Local Authority representatives attending the SW ABA meeting on 23.01.06.

Teresa Bliss, Sammy Boyle, Tony Glula, Ester Pickup-keller, Cath Wilson, Sue Walker, Andy Hickson, Bob Basley Geoff Wood

### **Actionwork, a member of the Anti-Bullying Alliance**

As a member of ABA and the ABA South West I am writing to express my dismay on hearing that George Robinson has lost the ABA contract for the South West Region. My understanding is that this was a politically motivated decision due to George's development and support of the 'No-Blame' approach to bullying.

I have been an active member of the South West region ABA since its conception and have found George's organisation of this to be impeccable. He has not pushed the No Blame approach in the region at all, but has in fact advocated a wide range of anti-bullying activities and approaches to all concerned.

What I have noticed in all my dealings with George is that he is very much in favour of a whole school approach and recognises that there is a huge variety of ways to deal with the issue of bullying. I have never heard him suggest that one way is better than another, but like all of us who work in the anti-bullying field, he of course has his own preferred way of working.

George has been a great ambassador for the ABA in the South West and has worked tirelessly in his dealings with local ABA members, the LEA's and a wide range of other groups in the region. His departure is a huge loss to the ABA and will leave a great hole in the region and the alliance as a whole.

Andy Hickson  
Director  
Actionwork

[www.actionwork.com](http://www.actionwork.com)

### **Childline in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS)**

I have met George and Barbara on several occasions now and I have always found them most genuine, helpful and clearly committed to promoting the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

George has initiated joint working among organisations concerned with young people, on the subject of bullying, and has been most supportive of ChildLine's work in the region.

During my work with pupils and staff on tackling bullying we discuss a variety of strategies including the " No blame support group approach" as well as peer support schemes etc.

I receive feedback from young people in my workshops and they are very clear that punitive approaches do not always work and may make a situation worse - clearly schools need to have a variety of strategies to use.

Judith Moore  
CHIPS Co-ordinator SW  
ChildLine

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

## USEFUL LINKS

### [www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying)

The UK Government's own site on bullying.

### [www.anti-bullyingalliance.org](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org)

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) was founded by NSPCC and National Children's Bureau in 2002. It brings together 65 organisations from the voluntary, public and private sector to work together to reduce bullying and create safer environments for children and young people. ABA is based at the National Children's Bureau.

### [www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org)

The world's largest site on bullying.

### [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

ChildLine is the UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in trouble or danger.

### [www.anti-bullyingalliance.org/journeys.htm](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org/journeys.htm)

The Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Al Aynsley-Green published a short report in November 2005 – Journeys – Children and Young People talking about Bullying.

Bullying Online at [www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk)

A UK registered charity helping parents and pupils deal with school bullying. It is currently running an independent survey in association with the Daily Mirror. Pupils, parents, teachers and other adults can all contribute their views about bullying [www.thenationalsurvey.co.uk](http://www.thenationalsurvey.co.uk)

### **No Bully**

A popular, well-organised New Zealand site developed to complement the Stop Bullying campaign run by the NZ Police and Telecom NZ. Material for children and adults - games, guidelines and a book of award-winning stories.

Diana Kathrein's [Parenting Today's Teen](#) has excellent ideas and links both for 'normal' issues and specific problems.

[Antibullying.net](#) is an extensive site for resources, support and links to schools doing quality antibullying work.

Buckholdt Associates [www.emotionalintelligence.co.uk](http://www.emotionalintelligence.co.uk) - Emotional Intelligence and Self Esteem Advisory Service.

Emotional Literacy - A link to other useful Emotional Literacy resources is [www.nelig.com](http://www.nelig.com).

### [www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk)

Antidote is a national charity promoting emotional literacy - the capacity to manage our emotions and to draw on our feelings in ways that enrich our learning and our interactions with others.

We create networks of people working in schools and other organisations to encourage the sort of conversations that enable people to become self-confident, appreciative of others, motivated to learn and capable of using the opportunities available to them.

We publish a newsletter, connect people via our website and organise conferences around the country. Our first Handbook will be published in the spring of 2002.

You can find out more about Antidote from Alice Haddon at [emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk](mailto:emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk).

### [www.NELIG.com](http://www.NELIG.com)

The National Emotional Literacy Interest Group - recognising, understanding, handling and appropriately expressing emotions. Nelig.com is dedicated to the promotion of emotional literacy for everyone adults and children alike. Our aim is to promote and resource emotional literacy defined as, "the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions". This site is updated regularly.

Bob Kizlik's [Adprima](#) is clear and well categorised with useful ratings of other sites.