



BULLYING AND PEER MEDIATION

Introduction

Within schools and other organisations, conflict resolution is used to build relationships and reach a consensus to resolve disputes. There is a range of techniques being used to address bullying which fit underneath the umbrella of conflict resolution. Approaches such as restorative practices, peer training, peer counselling and peer mentoring to name a few.

What is it and why use it?

Peer mediation is one of the techniques that can be used to find solutions to bullying incidents. It is about providing children and young people with the problem solving skills to deal with bullying incidents in a non-violent way. It allows children and young people to take responsibility for their feelings and behaviour and to have a say in incidents and decisions that affect them. It is not a method that will eradicate all bullying, but it provides children and young people with a growth in self-esteem and further coping mechanisms to deal with bullying behaviour and the impacts.

Peer mediation should not be considered as a soft option. It can create and encourage a safe environment where skills such as communication and listening are utilised to negotiate non-violent ways to resolve conflict.

It can allow all children and young people to examine the role they play in addressing bullying and offer alternatives to the bystander and witness roles. Children and young people can use the process when being bullied if they are reluctant to speak to adults.

Peer mediation is a process whereby two children or young people act as mediators to help people discuss how they feel, identify the problem and reach agreement on how to resolve situations and move forward. Mediators remain impartial and do not provide guidance or solutions but allow participants to reach them themselves. Responsibility and control remains with the participants at all times and to ensure this the process of mediation is on a voluntary basis.



Is it suitable for all bullying behaviours?

Peer mediation will only be suitable to deal with certain types of bullying behaviour. Children and young people who are being picked on or teased, being called names or being put down, being ignored left out or having rumours spread may benefit from this process.

However it is not suitable in all cases, for example, violent incidents, incidents based on difference or perceived difference and unlawful practices would require the support and intervention of adults. It is important to make these distinctions clear to all children and young people who are providing mediation and ensure that support is available for all concerned should it be required.

Confidentiality is also something that should be discussed. Peer mediators must be able to keep certain information confidential to ensure credibility and trust, however, child protection concerns that are disclosed to a peer mediator must be divulged to an adult. Clear training should be provided for this and all participants entering mediation should be made aware of the issues of confidentiality.

Peer mediation is not a quick and simple answer to all bullying problems. It is one strategy that can be utilised to address bullying but for it to be successful there are a number of factors and strategies that must support and complement this method. An organisational culture that encourages respect, values opinions, celebrates differences and promotes positive relationships will make it all the more difficult for bullying behaviour to flourish or be tolerated. The overarching ethos of any organisation should make it clear that bullying is never acceptable and that all adults and children and young people understand the role that they play in addressing bullying. Peer mediation is one aspect of supporting this culture.

Who should be trained?

Which children and young people? What should the selection criteria be? Who should choose? Are all questions that should be asked and discussed when setting up any peer mediation programme? Some organisations give all children and young people initial conflict resolution training to enhance the skills and growth of the full group. Then, from here, peer mediators are chosen for further training. Mediators can be chosen by children and young people or adults or a mixture of both nominating children and young people to be mediators. Another option is self-nomination where individuals come forward and must complete an application form to show commitment and reasons for wanting to be a peer mediator.



Who should be trained?

It is also important to ensure that the pool of peer mediators represents the children and young people that it will be serving. So, for example the number of male and females represent the wider organisational community.

Although peer mediation is primarily a practice provided by children and young people for children and young people, training is essential for everyone involved in the process. Children and young people should be provided training on the mediation principles of impartiality, confidentiality, voluntary participation and when to mediate and when not to.

Staff should be made aware of their role in co-ordinating and providing support to mediators. This will give an element of sustainability to any programme and ensure staff understands the process, its voluntary nature and the fact that it is child centred and orientated. The support of parents and carers is also important, ensuring they understand why peer mediation is being used and how this reflects the organisations overall ethos on anti-bullying.

Practical Considerations

Other Practical Considerations that should be taken into consideration when implementing any peer mediation programme are:

- Private, undisruptive, consistent space should be made available for mediations to take place.
- Scheduled times of when the service will be accessible, with a rota system of which peer mediators will be available.
- Promotion of the service should take place so that children and young people can become familiar with the service and gain trust in the mediators.
- Reminders, such as posters and workshops to ensure the service is embedded into day to day practices and to reinforce how it assists in reaching the organisations overall culture that bullying is unacceptable.

Peer mediation schemes should run alongside other anti-bullying measures and strategies to address bullying. The peer mediation ethos of improving and building relationships, finding non-violent ways to deal with conflict and problem-solving should be integrated into the wider organisational culture. Programmes will take time to put into practice and will also require the support of all staff and children and young people to be sustainable.