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## **Evaluation of the Beatbullying Peer Mentoring Programme**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Bullying is consistently identified as one of the key concerns of both young people and their parents. Mounting evidence suggests that bullying is negatively associated with mental health and well-being, not just for victims but also for the bullies themselves as well as for those who witness the incidents. There are increasing concerns about the rising prevalence of bullying through mobile phones and the internet ('cyberbullying').

One area of intervention that has received increasing attention is the use of peer support strategies. Recent national guidance – such as the *Safe to Learn* guidance from the DCSF in 2007 – specifically highlights the importance of pupil engagement and voice at all stages of anti-bullying work, and refers in particular to the use of strategies such as peer mentoring within schools.

Beatbullying registered as a charity in 2002 and has gained increasing recognition for its anti-bullying work in schools and communities in the UK. The central focus of Beatbullying is a peer mentoring programme, involving intense training in listening, mentoring, and online mentoring ('CyberMentoring'). The programme is intended to combine an effective peer support strategy (both within schools and online) with a substantial programme of opportunities for young people to bring about positive change through leadership and activism in and out of school.

## Aims

The aims of the present investigation were:

- 1) to present an overview of bullying and cyberbullying experiences of pupils at school, and to describe their connections with school climate and well-being;
- 2) to assess the impact of the Beatbullying programme with regard to bullying outcomes and broader social and emotional consequences; and
- 3) to describe and evaluate the implementation of the programme in order to understand the factors that promote success.

## Methodology

The project included three major components:

- 1) A **comprehensive survey** of over 1000 pupils from 11 middle/secondary schools. This work was conducted in order to identify levels of bullying, responses to bullying, pupil socio-emotional experiences, and overall school climate, in a range of schools that had just started or were due to start working with Beatbullying.
- 2) A combination of **follow-up surveys** (all within a one-year period) of approximately 350 pupils, peer mentors, and staff leads at five of the above schools, together with a **retrospective survey** of 117 peer mentors from 67 other schools.

This work was conducted in order to identify trends regarding changes in bullying experiences since the introduction of Beatbullying work at the schools, broader social and emotional impacts, and attitudes towards Beatbullying.

- 3) A series of **case studies** involving in-depth interviews with pupils, staff, and other stakeholders at eight secondary schools that have been involved in work with Beatbullying for differing lengths of time.

This work was conducted in order to provide a rich and detailed understanding of the different ways in which Beatbullying programmes had been introduced and implemented in schools, and to shed light on the key facilitating factors that make this work successful.

## Key findings

- 1) The initial comprehensive survey showed that a significant proportion of pupils experienced bullying and cyberbullying. There was clear evidence that these experiences were connected with lower well-being and poorer perceptions of school climate. Detailed analysis of the bullying experiences provided a clear rationale for the introduction of effective anti-bullying strategies in school.
- 2) Across the five schools recruited for follow-up assessments of bullying, there was an overall significant drop in the proportion of pupils who experienced intentional and persistent bullying, from 28% to 20.8% overall (equating to a reduction of approximately a quarter in the numbers being bullied, from 1 in every 3.6 pupils to 1 in every 4.8 pupils). Although this was not a randomised controlled experimental design, and even though the follow-up timescale was fairly short (within one year), it was notable that some schools showed substantial changes in bullying from before to after Beatbullying had been introduced. Furthermore, staff leads, Beatbullying peer mentors, and other pupils had a shared subjective perception that the introduction of Beatbullying mentors had led to a reduction of bullying problems at school.
- 3) Approximately 10% of the entire sample of pupils in the five follow-up schools had accessed Beatbullying mentors in connection with bullying. Of these pupils, virtually all found the mentor easy to contact, and three quarters felt that the mentor had been able to help them to at least some extent. Case studies indicated that the availability of peer mentors was perceived as particularly important for younger pupils, suggesting that Beatbullying programmes may be a crucial support for ensuring positive transition from primary to secondary school. In addition, the introduction of anonymous online mentoring by peers was seen as adding an important avenue of confidential support for pupils who are dealing with bullying or other related social problems.
- 4) The case studies and follow-up/retrospective surveys revealed a very strong consensus regarding the experience of being a Beatbullying peer mentor. Both the peer mentors themselves, and the staff leads responsible for coordinating their work in schools, shared a highly positive attitude towards the training received from Beatbullying as well as towards the experience of operating as peer mentors in school and/or online. The peer mentors themselves felt that they had personally

gained in significant ways from training and serving as Beatbullying mentors, and such benefits were also recorded independently by the school staff.

- 5) Detailed examination of the way in which Beatbullying had been introduced in schools showed a clear consensus about the awareness-raising function of this work. Specifically, a major impact of the Beatbullying programme was that – through a range of pupil activities both inside and outside of school – it raised awareness of bullying and cyberbullying within the school community. There was also a perception from staff, mentors, and the wider school pupil population that understanding of bullying had improved and that reporting of bullying had increased.
- 6) Positive impacts on broader social and emotional well-being were not yet evident at the time of the follow-up surveys, but pupils in general reported significantly fewer difficulties in responding assertively to bullying. In some (though not all) of the schools, case study interviews showed that the introduction of Beatbullying mentors was beginning to have an impact on the overall ethos and atmosphere of the school as a whole.
- 7) Case studies revealed that schools varied dramatically in the extent to which they were able to incorporate Beatbullying work into the fabric of the whole-school community. Schools differed in the extent to which the activities of the Beatbullying mentors were coordinated and organised. As a result, awareness and knowledge about Beatbullying activities were much stronger in some schools than in others. Some of the survey responses also showed that the significant awareness-raising efforts of Beatbullying mentors had not reached all pupils.
- 8) The in-depth interviews conducted at the eight case study schools provided important insights into the key factors that promoted successful implementation of Beatbullying programmes. These included the presence of lead members of staff with status and influence within the school, who had dedicated time and resources to coordinate and manage the Beatbullying work. In addition, it was clear that schools which already had effective channels of communication (among both pupils and staff) were particularly successful in coordinating and developing the work of the Beatbullying peer mentors.
- 9) Overall, rather than being an ‘exclusive’ approach that *replaced* other school practices designed to target bullying problems and support pupils, Beatbullying programmes were clearly being used and regarded as a crucial *extension* to existing practice. The way in which it engaged and empowered pupils in combating bullying and antisocial behaviour, and in supporting each other, was seen as a major strength.

## Recommendations

- 1) The Beatbullying peer mentoring programme should continue to be supported and publicised as a positive and effective anti-bullying strategy in schools.
- 2) The highly-regarded training provided to peer mentors should be extended as part of a wider programme of within-school strategies, in order to maximise impact. This should include:
  - a. Guidance on the optimal selection of peer mentors;
  - b. Support to schools in coordinating follow-up meetings;
  - c. Careful monitoring of peer mentoring activities and regular feedback to schools;
  - d. Training/dissemination activities to engage all school staff; and
  - e. A strategy for continued training of successive cohorts of mentors, in order to ensure sustainability.
- 3) The existing strategies for external supervision and support of the Beatbullying mentoring activities should be enhanced further.
- 4) Further research should be commissioned to investigate the wider impact of Beatbullying work over a longer timeframe, preferably using a randomised control-group design.