

At *respectme*, Scotland's Anti-Bullying Service we work to build the capacity, competence and confidence of **adults** who have a role to play in the lives of Scotland's Children and Young People. We offer a free policy consultancy service, free training programmes for professionals and parents, we campaign and share great resources www.respectme.org.uk



Guest writer Lorraine Glass, Policy and Improvement Manager at respectme speaks to the mental health impacts of bullying on children and young people, and what adults can do to help.

At the time of writing it is Mental Health Awareness week, themed around 'kindness' for 2020, so the invite to contribute is timely, as bullying is surely the very antithesis of kindness. However, there is not a single day at *respectme* where our thoughts don't turn to the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland's children and young people, and never more so than in this Covid-19 lockdown when schools and youth clubs are closed. For some children, these can be the very places where the greatest harms of bullying play out. Crucially though, they are often the only true spaces of mental safety and kindness, where supportive adults can intervene, healing can take place, relationships may be restored and where happier memories can help overwrite the more difficult ones.

Bullying can mentally overwhelm children. It can feel relentless and pervasive, especially when it's online. We know it affects their sense of being in control – stripping them of what the national definition describes as 'agency'. Children tell us that bullying 'takes something away from them', leaving them paralysed to act to challenge the behaviour, or to seek help for themselves. In Scotland, anti-bullying policy and practice sits in the context of a relational and restorative approach, anchored in children's rights, with respect at its heart and kindness designed-in.

Bullying derides and diminishes, making people feel 'less'. I have yet to meet an adult whose life has been completely untouched by bullying - we've either seen it, done it or had it done to us. Instant recall of that sense of powerlessness brings, for most, a visceral drive for change through prevention, reduction and response to ensure today's generation are neither broken nor defined by it. Adults who hold to the old mantras of bullying being inevitability, a character-building experience or indeed, a 'normal' part of growing up are revisiting and challenging these attitudes, leaving our training courses with an updated understanding and refreshed, kinder resolve.

Trusted adults are a vital protective factor in bringing a balanced, healthy perspective to bullying situations to reassure children that what they're enduring will not last forever, change will come, they are not at fault and that they will be helped to recover. For the children displaying bullying behaviour, they too can be supported by being helped to better understand what is going on – what feelings are being communicated through their behaviour, and how is it impacting them, and others? Adults can encourage self-reflection, grow empathy skills, challenge prejudices, and set tasks to build confidence and resilience whilst celebrating every small change towards improvement. Adults can also model kindness, especially for those children who find it a quality hard to access and an alien concept in their wider life experience.

We know that bullying can cause anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts so we must be vigilant, available, calm, supportive and effective in our responses. We need to keep children who are affected at the centre of any actions, be led by their desired outcomes and work to achieve those results whilst keeping them safe. Be that person who aids bullied children to regain their agency and helps those who bully to learn that, whilst kindness is a fine aspirational destination, simply being respectful is as strong, and perhaps a more achievable, starting point.