

BULLYING SURVEY: FEEDBACK AND COMMENTARY

At the end of Spring Term, second-formers were asked to reflect on the nature of bullying, offering mostly anonymous written responses. As much as I wanted to check their understanding on issues raised during assemblies and form-time, I also wanted to give them an opportunity to voice their honest opinions about their personal experiences, here at CLS, and to find out whether they felt sufficiently supported within our school community.

The responses were illuminating. These 13 year old boys displayed an impressive range of emotional maturity in their candid feedback. Of course, they all know that CLS has a 'zero tolerance policy' on bullying, but what was especially interesting was their appreciation of how bullying is not always a straightforward, black-and-white issue. Reassuringly, the majority of boys felt supported at our school, whilst a few called for greater vigilance on our part, as you will see in the sample responses.

1. 'Why do you think some pupils bully others?'

On a recent inset, I was interested to hear one school counsellor of 30 years experience point out how bullying amongst girls often arises out of jealousy issues, whereas amongst boys it commonly boils down to needing to establish a pecking-order; a hierarchy of power. Unfortunately, with their increased levels of testosterone, this typically male need to 'flex muscle' and show 'who's the boss' can be a problem amongst some teenagers. Responses to this question of why they think pupils bully others did, in fact, often make mention of this macho need to act tough as an individual or 'pack' show of dominance. There was also strong recognition of how bullying may stem from stress at home and a boy's need to vent that anger on somebody at school. Here follows a selection of feedback:

- 'Maybe to make the pupil feel better or bigger about himself by putting someone else down - (like in a swimming pool – pushing someone else under the water to boost yourself out of the water).
- 'I think they feel insecure about themselves and want to up their status. Also it is done for showing off'.
- 'Because it may give them a feeling of power and superiority over the person that they are bullying'. / 'It is used as a sign of leadership'. / 'They may want to feel more dominant'.
- 'They spot a boy who is emotionally weaker than them'.
- 'To show off to their friends and to impress them. Maybe there is something happening in their lives and the only way to escape it is to make somebody feel down'.
- 'Some people bully others as they want attention and may not get that attention at home. They therefore take out that loneliness and sadness at school'.
- 'Because they have been bullied; they have trouble at home; they want to look hard or cool; to try and make friends'.
- 'Because the victim does not conform to any kind of normal behaviour so they are seen as strange to the bully'.
- 'For the fun of it...also peer pressure – someone tells them to bully someone else or they won't like them'.
- 'They just might want to get a cheap laugh'.

2. Have you ever been bullied, here or at your previous school? If yes, try and describe how it made you feel.

The answers here confirmed the depth of feeling felt by the small minority of second-formers who have experienced bullying. Many voiced feelings of insignificance and alienation: for example, 'miserable, trapped and afraid'; 'unimportant and stupid'; 'lonely and left out'; 'small and unwanted'; 'helpless'; 'sad'. Feelings of anger and ridicule were also typical: 'It made me feel extremely angry and I wondered why the bully could not accept our differences'; 'It made me feel really angry with the bully. I wanted to cry, but I would just get laughed at'; and 'It makes you feel as if everyone hates you. You feel ashamed to talk to people. You feel hatred of the people bullying you'. One boy spoke of his need to withdraw into himself: 'I 'go into my shell'', he said, 'and wonder where the next remark will come from'.

One message we impress upon our pupils concerns the *long-term* effects of bullying; the fact that if enough damage is done to self-esteem during these formative years, then we carry these feelings into adulthood. I am pleased to say that sobering messages such as these are often enough to shake the boys out of their ignorance or at the very least to build upon their existing decent values. Most of our boys, as civilised as they generally are, do in fact possess the self-discipline to refrain from baser instincts and are frankly *unwilling* to behave in a way that would ever result in another's unhappiness. Regretfully, boys who fail to understand the negative impact of their behaviour on others, despite our repeated warnings and second chances, do end up forfeiting their position as a member of our school.

3. Do you feel there is enough done about bullying at CLS? Do you feel supported? (If not, try and offer a suggestion about how we could help you better).

Many boys admired our firm but fair policy on bullying and a few made direct reference to the three boys who have left this current Second Year, perceiving this as a 'strong message to others' and a positive deterrent. 'There is enough done', remarked one boy, 'because people aren't afraid to say to teachers they are being bullied, and when they tell, something fair but tough is done to the bully. In extreme cases, people are made to leave the school'. There was also much praise for teachers' speedy and supportive handling of bullying incidents, along with a common recognition of a friendly and safe ethos at CLS.

- 'I think (bullying) is being handled well because when I was being bullied, it was sorted out straight away. CLS has also made me more assertive so it doesn't happen anymore'.
- 'There is a lot of support. What teachers say will happen with bullying is actually carried out instead of making empty promises'.
- 'Yes, as there have been teachers talking to us and through lectures in assembly. Also bullies are taken out of the school if they are caught more than once in serious occasions'.
- 'Yes I do as they have 0% tolerance policy; sometimes they make threats so it doesn't happen in the future'.
- 'I think that enough is being done about bullying at CLS because bullying is always stopped before it gets out of hand. Also the Form Tutor and Head of Year always encourage the victims of bullying to come out and tell someone'.
- 'I feel very safe at the school'.

A number of boys, however, felt that things were left too late; that teachers need to be more vigilant and inquiring about their welfare.

- ‘I think there is a lot done, and inevitably there will always be bullying in any school, but I do think that staff at the school should be more on the look-out for bullying’.
- ‘I think the school does come down on bullying well, but sometimes (they) leave it too late for it to be dealt with appropriately’.
- ‘I think that there is enough done by bullying, but if teachers hear or see someone being bullied, I think that they should do more about it. At the moment, I don’t think that teachers recognise that they have to help on the spot’.
- ‘Yes, but sometimes in the form room things go on and as there aren’t any teachers in it, you don’t see what happens’.
- ‘No and I suggest that when a pupil looks alone and sad, teachers should investigate more about how and why they are feeling that way’.

Such feedback is always useful to us because it gets us to think again about how we deal with certain situations: to sharpen up our act if we think it needs sharpening. Of course, our response to bullying should never be delayed to the extent that a situation deteriorates and festers, but nor should it be hasty and ill-considered. Ideally, we nip the early signs of bullying in the bud, informed by our own close observations, and on occasion by concerned parents, or indeed, by the boys who feel brave enough to come forwards and seek help. Whilst it is usually the case that the boys themselves or their friends make their unhappiness known to us, there are, however, times when a victim of bullying may stay silent for fear of repercussions.

- ‘There can’t really be enough done to stop bullying because some people don’t report it. They feel that if they report it, they will get beaten up’.
- ‘There is enough support but the bullied choose not to use it, because then they would be a snitch and people would hate or bully them more because of that’.

Incidentally, for those who might find it too difficult, in the first instance, to speak to a teacher, we have recently installed a ‘Comments Box’, situated near the School Nurse’s office. This allows boys to leave notes, anonymously or not, to be checked on a weekly basis by the Second Master, Mr. Tolhurst. By this method, or by the comments made by parents, friends and teachers, those who suffer in silence are usually identified. We are then in a position to reassure the boy concerned that he need not fear repercussions; we reissue warnings to the relevant form against further upset and should this then occur, serious sanctions are taken against those who fail to correct their behaviour. Careful vigilance on our part is required if we are to spot such cultures of oppression where a boy is threatened into silence; equally, should a boy pass comment at home or appear unusually subdued or anxious, then we would urge parents to share this information with us so that we can help.

4. ‘Banter and bullying: banter means ‘the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks’ and is a very boyish/laddish pursuit! When, in your view, does banter become bullying?’

Pleasingly, the majority of boys agree on the point that ‘banter becomes bullying when it is excessive and you start hurting someone’s feelings’. This, of course, is the bottom-line reality which needs emphasising to the boys who get confused about the differences. As one boy rightly observed, banter becomes bullying when ‘you realise you are offending people and you pursue (them) when they firmly ask you to stop’. It is this problem of ‘going too far’, of not knowing where to draw the line which is typical of certain boys’ immaturity. We often hear ‘I was only joking’ or ‘I didn’t think

he minded' and at times, such phrases can indeed be genuine excuses for not being able to read the signs of somebody's distress. Sometimes, for example, a boy responds to banter by laughing along with it, wanting to keep up a laddish unconcerned exterior to show that he can cope. Another boy commented, the victim 'may be getting hurt but holding it in' and for this reason, it may be difficult for some to understand the impact of what they are saying.

However, the comment 'I was only joking' is too easily used as an excuse and becomes indefensible, especially when the injured party has actually asked a boy to stop. At CLS, we are lucky to be dealing with boys of high intelligence who, for the most part, do know better than to persist with taunting comments. For those who do not, it is again a question of educating them about boundaries and appealing to their developing sensibilities that they start to read the signals more carefully or to imagine what it might feel like if they were on the receiving end.

Inevitably, it is upsetting for teachers and parents to read about the extent to which a victim of bullying suffers, which is why the quashing of any rising nastiness should always be job of paramount importance in any school. Both here and at home, it is something which requires daily vigilance and if we are to live up to the prospectus' claim that 'the school encourages you to be an individual and it's not hard to make your own way', then it is something for which we must fight. True individuality only flourishes, I believe, if it grows from a supportive and non-threatening community and this is a culture towards which we always aspire.

To help us in this, please do keep a look out for any signs of unhappiness in your son regarding bullying. Together with our combined vigilance and concern, it should be a question of keeping each other informed; of reporting any early signs so that we can intervene and prevent any further distress.

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