# DEANERY DIGEST

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following published research article Badger, J. R., Nisar, A., Lee, N. W. T., & Romanova, K. (2025). Bullying or counter-connecting? Two inclusive definitions for schools. *Support for Learning, 00,* 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.70006

This Digest was prepared by Julia Badger

# Bullying or counter-connecting?

## What is this research about and why is it important?

On average, about 40% of children and young people are exposed to bullying. However, this rate is as high as 69% for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Bullying involvement can have detrimental effects on mental health in both the short- and long-term and can be heightened for children with SEND who often experience bullying more intensely or cannot fully comprehend the situations and related emotions.

Although reducing bullying in schools has been a public health priority for years, there is still no standardised or universally accepted definition of bullying. The definitions used are often not inclusive of the experiences of children with SEND. Correctly defining and therefore distinguishing bullying from other aggressive or hurtful behaviours is essential.

This paper focused on developing a usable definition of bullying for researchers and school staff that can be applied not only to mainstream school and typically developing children but also to those with SEND, neurodivergence, or who are attending special schools. A definition which can easily be checked and understood by teaching staff, practitioners and researchers working directly with children, as well as the children's parents, will help to avoid over- or under-reporting and managing of bullying incidences in school.

## What did we do?

We searched and reviewed the current international literature on bullying definitions and bullying programmes and resources for children with SEND, to identify key terms, themes and suggestions for addressing bullying. From this we identified three key terms that were common in defining bullying in the literature. These were: repetition, intent, and power imbalance.

We then spoke with seven special school teachers and seven parents of children with SEND to explore those key terms as they related specifically to children with SEND. We also discussed and invited suggestions on other aspects or experiences related to bullying among this group. We recorded and transcribed what was said and looked for reoccurring themes and patterns across the different interviews (known as thematic analysis).

## What did we find?

Parents and teachers felt as though the definitions currently used were accurate, but that they were limited in terms supporting children with SEND. Of all the topics mentioned or raised, five were

consistently discussed as requiring inclusion or expansion in the current definitions: 1) intent, 2) power imbalance, 3) cyberbullying, 4) awareness and social interaction, 5) direction of bullying.

We then updated a commonly used definition of bullying to reflect the new themes that emerged from our discussions. Our updated* definition of bullying is as follows:

Bullying:

- Involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time, *from the same or different people, and in the same or different method*
- Can take many different forms including physical contact, words, mean gestures, exclusion from a group *or negative contact via digital device or platform*
- Involves an imbalance of strength or power *including age, strength, size, intellectual capacity, social skill understanding and emotional stability*
- The victim has difficulty defending themselves *or is unaware of being bullied*
- Harm is being inflicted intentionally.

*New elements that emerged from our discussions are in italics.

In addition, it became apparent that simply redefining bullying was not sufficient. We therefore coined a new term – 'counter-connecting' – which identifies a situation in which an individual is targeted and victimised (as in a bullying situation), but there is no intentional, negative perpetrator (unlike a bullying situation). For example: a child may be trying to connect positively with another child (wanting to become their friend) but they are unsure how to do so, and so they punch the other child, thinking that this forms a connection. They may continue to perform this action over a period of hours, days or weeks without realising the distress and upset they are causing the other child (who is technically being targeted and victimised by these actions). The intent and desire are positive, but the connection has gone wrong. The child is counter-connecting.

Counter-connecting:

- Involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time.
- *Can occur peer-to-peer but also between pupils and teachers.*
- Can take many different forms including physical contact, words, mean gestures, exclusion from a group *or negative contact via digital device or platform.*
- *An act that causes unintentional victimisation of another. There is a victim.*
- *Harm may be inflicted unintentionally.*

## What does it all mean anyway?

If situated within a suitable anti-bullying programme, policy and/or whole-school approach, these two more accurate and useful definitions can work to impact the wider societal acknowledgement and recognition of bullying situations, enabling more supportive responses and actions from those around including teachers, pupils and parents. Accurate identification and management of both bullying and counter-connecting can result in better mental health of all pupils, especially those with SEND.

In turn, having accurate definitions will help to definitively design and then evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions.

The full open access paper is available here: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.70006

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