

Building houses of empathy:
**Recommendations for
bullying prevention in
children's residential
care settings**



houses of
empathy



The recommendations in this publication were gathered by the Houses of Empathy partner organisations.

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Note: We know that gender equality is a human right and we respect and promote its implementation. Whenever a gender-specific term is used, e.g. 'he', it should be understood as referring to both genders, unless explicitly stated.



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Welcome to Houses of Empathy!

Houses of Empathy is a European project that took place in Portugal, Spain, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland from 2015 to 2017 with the aim of contributing to the reduction of violence amongst peers in children's residential care settings. The project focused on building the first bullying prevention programme specifically designed for children in residential care settings based on: the cultivation of empathy skills among children, young people and staff; identifying and promoting good practices in the field; and aspiring to standards of excellence in programme delivery.

Primarily, the Houses of Empathy programme develops and reinforces personal and social skills in children and young people in care. However, to achieve a wider impact, the project also aimed to reach other stakeholders in the child protection community through awareness - raising activities and dissemination of several resources, inviting all to play a key role in promoting positive environments in residential care settings.

The 10 recommendations for Public Authorities are the result of: international research completed; feedback from children and young people in care during the pilot programme; and feedback from organizations and professionals.

These recommendations are an invitation to public bodies, with an active voice in the

child protection community, to explore bullying prevention to ensure the wellbeing of children in care. These recommendations also support public bodies to take tangible measures to improve children's residential care settings' response to bullying through the implementation of strong, sustainable anti-bullying policies in all children's homes.

#1

Agreement on a common understanding of bullying by all stakeholders in the child protection community

While implementing the project, the consortium noted many misconceptions and lack of knowledge about bullying within the child protection community (young people, educational teams and supervisory bodies).

We believe that for effective prevention and intervention in bullying incidents, it is extremely important to have a common understanding of bullying (definition, behaviours, participants) among all stakeholders. An improved ability to understand bullying episodes will, consequently, contribute to more effective detection and better management of bullying behaviours.

The Houses of Empathy project produced the *State of the Art Report on Bullying in Children's Residential Care Settings*, as well as the *Best Practice Guide on Bullying Prevention in Children's Residential Care Settings*, both freely available in English, Spanish and Portuguese¹. These publications are good sources of knowledge as they tap into a diverse range of recent studies, publications and other resources from around the world that could be useful for professionals in the field. Additionally, we suggest that bullying should be discussed further within the child protection community: at national and local level; in conferences, round tables, or simply in staff team meetings. This would help increase awareness

on the topic and promote a deeper understanding of its causes and consequences.

We, therefore, recommend that Public Authorities promote events where these topics can be discussed and disseminate resources that assist teams to better manage bullying situations. We also propose the agreement on a standardised clear definition of bullying, accepted by all authorities. This would help reduce, and hopefully eliminate, any confusion on defining or identifying bullying incidents.

1 - Both publications can be downloaded here:
<http://housesofempathy.eu/en/publicacoes/>

#2

Provide more training on bullying intervention and prevention for the staff

During this project, the team had the opportunity to train and survey staff from some children's residential care settings in the countries involved. 42 out of 50 professionals surveyed reported that bullying had been present in their homes at some stage. More than 90% reported that they had not received any training on preventative measures or how to manage bullying situations or support targets of bullying in a residential environment.

These findings are concerning especially since bullying is considered a form of violence that, according to Cook & Howell (2014), contributes to poorer academic and social performance and long-term negative consequences such as: psychological disturbances, relationship difficulties, substance abuse, underachievement at school, self-harm or suicide¹.

During our training, staff from residential care specifically mentioned needing support or training in identifying, preventing and handling bullying situations. Following the Houses of Empathy training programme participants showed high levels of satisfaction with their newly acquired skills. Some trainees highlighted that as a result of the Houses of Empathy training programme they view bullying differently and are more reflective on their practice. The trainees believe that the programme, once implemented within their home, could have a positive impact on peer relation-

ships and, though the empathy approach, could reduce peer on peer violence.

Thus, the Houses of Empathy team recommends more training opportunities for technical, educational, and social work teams in residential settings on this subject.

Staff training could improve the assessment of bullying cases, enable staff to better identify and support young people who are being bullied as well as offer the right support to perpetrators and bystanders who are also affected. All and all, this would increase the organisations' capacity to prevent such violence among children and young people in care.

1 - More information on the long-term effects of bullying in children can be found in the *State of the Art Report on bullying in children's residential care settings*, page 10.

#3

Empower educational and social work teams to promote young people's personal and social skills

An effective way to prevent bullying incidents is to help young people develop skills that will enable them to better communicate their needs and frustrations, negotiate solutions with their peers and manage their emotions in a constructive way.

Educational and social work teams have a major role in promoting the development of these life skills in children and young people. However, the house routine, staff rotation and other aspects of the day-to-day life in the home doesn't always allow enough space for professionals to focus on fostering these skills in young people.

Therefore, specific training for staff on how to nurture and encourage positive behaviours and help develop social and life

skills in children and young people should be provided. Such training should include specific approaches and tools that can be directly applied in such contexts, taking into consideration the characteristics of the daily life in of these facilities.

We also recommend providing training to all staff on Personal and Social Skills Development in Young People.

Moving beyond the topic of bullying, this training will help professionals to develop personal and social skills in young people on a daily basis. Developing these skills, will, in turn, support young people to identify, report, and talk about bullying within the home.



#4

Promote more research on bullying in children's residential care settings



During the development of the project, we realised that there is very little information about bullying in the context of residential care. We believe that it is important to encourage and invest more in research in this area. Studies in this field would allow the community to deepen its knowledge of this specific problem and find new strategies for prevention and intervention in bullying situations.

The Houses of Empathy project researched the most recent studies and main references in the academic world concerning the study of bullying and its evolution. The main conclusion of our analysis was that the vast majority of surveys, studies, theories and intervention programmes developed in the last few decades were aimed at, or focused on, schools.

Even if many of the principles and findings in these studies could be transferred to the project's target group, more information on the specifics of how bullying happens and

its effects on children residential care settings is urgently required. This would help to develop more targeted and evidence-based interventions that take into account the characteristics of children and young people in care, the specific nature of the relationships between staff and young people and the spaces where the incidents happen.

Thus, we recommend that Public Authorities actively promote research in this area, developing partnerships with Higher Education Institutions and Research Departments, developing calls for researchers, organising initiatives that promote further study of the phenomenon of bullying within this setting.

#5

Ensure conditions that promote the wellbeing of educational and social work teams

Children and young people need to establish secure and stable relationships with significant adults. To be effective, interventions require regularity, which is sometimes impacted by a teams' turnover.

Child and youth care is considered one of the most difficult and emotionally exhausting careers in the human service industry (Krueger, 2002). According to Barford & Whelton (2010), there are inherent challenges in working within the life-space of high-risk children and young people. These challenges can lead to emotional exhaustion either from work pressure, role ambiguity, or lack of recognition. The lack of wellbeing in the teams can also negatively affect their relationship with the young people in their care and reduce their capacity to manage stressful situations, thus impacting the children's wellbeing as well. Because of this, caring for the caregivers becomes an important element in guaranteeing a positive environment in care set-

tings. Job pressure, for example, could be reduced by increasing the number of staff per child ratio or allowing for adequate time and space for debriefing with workers after difficult situations with children.

Other studies show that good management practices, such as well-defined objectives and procedures for specific tasks and processes, providing close supervision, and ensuring good teamwork based on mutual support can be advantageous in an organizational culture that supports the wellbeing of its staff (Valle, López & Bravo, 2007).

We recommend that working conditions (e.g. training, schedules, psychological support, supervision, remuneration) should be guaranteed to ensure sound, motivated and consistent technical, educational and social work teams in children's residential care.



#6

Encourage the implementation of the Houses of Empathy programme with children and young people

The execution of the Houses of Empathy project showed us that it is important to implement structured programmes to promote personal and social skills directly with children and young people in residential care. Moreover, it revealed the pertinence of exploring bullying with the whole group through the lens of empathy, thus giving the intervention a more positive outlook.

After the implementation of the programme, children and young people stated to better understand what is bullying, the different roles involved and how to deal with these situations. They've also highlighted the importance of acquired skills, such as communication and assertiveness, cooperation and problem solving. In general, they were pleased with the programme, having frequently defined Houses of Empathy as a space of fun, friendship, respect and empathy.

The project's mid-term report also revealed that several educators, from different participating countries, mentioned the fact that some children kept using the learned concepts in daily life and referred to the knowledge learned, when real bullying situations occurred following the programme.

Many of the methods used in the programme, namely group activities/challenges and forum theatre, have proven to be very suitable solutions to address bullying with this target audience.

We, therefore, recommend that children's residential care settings implement educational programmes, such as the *Houses of Empathy Anti-bullying Programme*, in order to promote healthy peer group relationships.



Support the creation of a national anti-bullying policy for children residential care settings

Preventing bullying in the context of residential care should be a priority. The Children and Youth Departments of both public and private national organisations have the power to influence and encourage the creation of a national anti-bullying policy.

In the search for good practice in this field, the Houses of Empathy project identified a few examples of policies that were developed to tackle the issue with a more holistic approach.

The Irish Department of Education's *2013 Action Plan on Bullying*¹, for example, identified the priorities that need to be addressed to decrease bullying incidents and prevent future bullying behaviour. Consequently, anti-bullying procedures were agreed upon and disseminated nationwide.

The *Anti-Bullying Policy for Children's Homes* (2005)² is another example, from Northern Ireland, of a policy created to establish minimum standards and provide specific recommendations for staff in terms of their response to cases of bullying among children in care. It offers a clear set of anti-bullying strategies and defines the responsibilities both from staff and from the children themselves. The document also underlines the importance of the support given both to the targets of bullying and the perpetrators and emphasises the role of the ethos of the organisation in en-

suring a safe environment to live and grow.

We recommend creating an anti-bullying policy at national level that presents a clear definition of bullying, defines minimum standards, offers guidelines and support for organisations to develop strategies to prevent and deal with bullying, and supports the further development of appropriate legislative framework.

This will allow homes to effectively; acquire a shared perspective on the action plan on bullying, identify bullying situations, implement an on-going preventative approach to bullying and increase the quality of practitioners' responses to bullying incidents.

1 - This publications can be downloaded here:
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Action-Plan-On-Bullying-2013.pdf>

2 - Read more about this topic in:
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Anti-Bullying-Procedures-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf>

#8

Support the implementation of anti-bullying codes of conduct in each care setting

The purpose of different preventative strategies and procedures to be adopted in bullying situations should be known and shared by all members of technical, educational and social work teams. **Therefore, it is recommended that the management and/or supervising bodies of residential facilities encourage (in the form of guidelines or legal requirements) all homes to create their own anti-bullying code of conduct.**

Some recommendations for the creation of a code of conduct include:

- Create a specific recording mechanism for bullying situations: according to professionals involved in the activities of the Houses of Empathy, there are generally no specific recording procedures for bullying situations. These incidents are registered together with other situations of violence/aggression. We suggest that a specific bullying recording document is created to



isolate these cases. It might be relevant to create a database with all these reports since their analysis would allow a better understanding of bullying patterns in this specific setting and better understand the true extent of the problem.

- Appoint one person responsible for leading out on the management of bullying cases: as suggested in the Houses of Empathy Handbook, it is important that information on bullying situations is shared with the whole team and that loss of information between shifts is avoided. We recommend that organisations identify a team member that is responsible for managing all issues related to bullying, in particular complaints, reports, etc. Children and young people should be also informed who this person is.
- Assign a young person to mentor/support new children/young people: it is important for young people to realise that bullying is not tolerated in their life space and that not only adults, but also other young people,

are committed to this. To this end, we recommend that one or more young people can become responsible for hosting new incomers and supporting them where necessary to ensure successful integration.

- Involve children and young people in the development and regular revision of the house Code of Conduct.
- Make bullying a topic on every team meetings' agenda. This will support more regular and consistent recording of bullying behaviour, which will support any intervention or prevention strategy to be developed. It will also be key in identifying trends and patterns of bullying within the homes.

Other good practices include: stating the organisational stance on bullying; clarifying the rights and responsibilities, both for young people and for staff who work with them, and specifying what support mechanisms will be in place for all those involved in incidents.



#9

Encourage the inclusion of bullying information in *Welcome Packs* distributed to young people at the time of their admission

Information on procedures for reporting bullying should be shared early on with children and young people. **Thus, we suggest that a bullying section should be included in the *Welcome Pack*, already distributed in some homes.** This section should include an explanation about bullying, as well as procedures for reporting bullying (whether for targets or bystanders). In the event that not all the care settings have a *Welcome Pack*, it is advisable to create one and distribute it to all the young people.

Welcome Packs can be a good way to ensure that, from the beginning, children and young people are well informed about their new home, their rights and responsi-

bilities, the functioning of the house, the team composition, etc. These documents should not only be just handed out to the newcomers, but also explained carefully using a language suitable for their age group. *Welcome Packs* can also be a good support for staff as they can serve as a basis for the first interaction, and can be developed further with the help of home's residents.

Additionally, developing a *Welcome Pack* that includes information about bullying will help the team and the young people who live in the home, to develop a better organisational ethos, one that promotes children's rights, mutual respect and the active participation of all.



#10

Adopt restorative practices to manage bullying behaviour in residential care

It is important to realise that bullying exists in children's residential care and that it does not only affect the targets and the perpetrators: it affects everyone, both the young people and the adults. At times, the solution found by teams is to avoid having some young people in the same space, even transferring targets of bullying to other homes, in an attempt to safeguard them. In Houses of Empathy, we argue that intervention in bullying episodes should be solution-focused and holistic, following a perspective of accountability rather than blame. As such, we believe in "restorative practices" that advocate the involvement of all stakeholders in the search for a solution to bullying incidents.

An example of restorative practice is the "No-Blame" approach. This helps young people to see the role they are playing in bullying or harassment that's happening in their peer group as well as their shared responsibility in solving the issue. It strengthens empathetic thinking within the peer group.

According to the *Swim Ireland Anti-Bullying Policy*¹, the No Blame approach tries to find a solution for the young people involved in a bullying episode whilst maintaining positive relationships within the group. It encourages young people to take responsibility for their behaviour and adjust it according to the situation. This approach implies that adults are able to gather the group;

explain the situation without accusations; ask for ideas on how to solve the problem; leave the group to put their ideas into practice and meet with the people involved to check if the behaviours have improved.

This is a restorative practice and it has shown better results than interventions using a retributive, rules and consequences approach. This approach does not attempt to get confessions, it seeks to get young people to acknowledge their behaviour and provides an opportunity for individuals to change hurtful behaviour. Making contracts for good behaviour is also an effective technique. It's important to let children and young people know that 'reporting' means 'supporting'.

Therefore we recommend that public authorities disseminate information and promote restorative practices, through workshops and training in behaviour management in children's residential care settings, since these practices have shown better results in the long term.

1 - More information here:
<http://www.swimireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/11/Anti-bullying-policy-Nov-2015-Final.pdf>



Other Financers:



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