

Recently, well over half of you participated in our anti-bullying questionnaire, which we run every two years. It always provides a very interesting insight into your experiences - and gives me plenty to talk to you about in my follow-up assembly. Overall, the results painted a positive picture of life at Tormead, but there is always more to look at - and a school that denies it has ever had instances of bullying is a school that prefers to turn a blind eye than to address any problems that do exist and do its best to help solve them.

One of the things that I have been keen to do for some time has been to get pupils involved in helping to write a pupil-focused anti-bullying statement. It was really encouraging to read that 87% of you not only knew that we had an anti-bullying policy, but also could tell us where to find it. To clear this up for those of you who didn't know - it is on App4 and also on the website. However, those of you that have ever looked at it, will know that it is written rather wordily and runs to eight dense pages. Plus, over 90% of you told me that you thought it would probably be a good idea to have a pupil-friendly version. I was keen to hear what you, the people it is aimed at helping, thought were the important messages and produce a document which reflected these key points.

And so, my crack team of volunteer Year 7 to Year 9 pupils helped me to put together a simpler, more focused, and much shorter, version of the anti-bullying policy document. In the next week, you will see versions of this appearing in classroom notice boards around school, as well as on App4. This document is written by you and aimed at you but I wanted to take the opportunity today to go through it and make you aware of its key points. It was a very interesting exercise for me, highlighting some areas where girls did not know how we as staff work here - which I will endeavour to shed light upon today - and others where they were able to give me a sense of the pupil perspective. Ultimately, that is the most important thing for all of us in this room.

The first thing the document says is:

*At Tormead, we treat each other with respect and dignity. Bullying is completely unacceptable and we want to eliminate it.*

This is such an important message and I really want you to hear it.

*At Tormead, we treat each other with respect and dignity. Bullying is completely unacceptable and we want to eliminate it.*

You really need to hear this, because it makes very clear where we stand on bullying - if it's happening, it is absolutely NOT OK. These opening sentences also underline that we will give you all our support in ensuring that it stops. No grey areas.

However, it does need to be said here, that bullying has a very specific definition. Falling out with a friend or group of friends/ someone being mean to you on one or two occasions/ finding someone dislikeable or difficult/ being upset by someone's behaviour - these, while unpleasant, are not in themselves examples of bullying. Accusing someone of bullying is serious - as is bullying itself. Essentially, bullying is systematic abuse. That means it is deliberate, ongoing and causes harm. We have chosen to pull out its key aspects in the pupil policy statement:

Bullying is very specifically defined as:

- conscious
- repeated over time
- intended to hurt (physical or emotional)
- often motivated by prejudice
- an abuse of power

It might be physical, verbal, direct or indirect. It might also be cyberbullying, which happens over social media.

This does not for a moment mean that the instances I gave you above will not also be dealt with as unacceptable behaviour. It does not mean that they are ok or that you cannot feel very upset by them or that we won't handle them with a similar approach - but they are different. One of the first things we will do when you come to speak to us is decide what exactly has been going on.

On which note - a word of advice and caution. One thing that really helps us to deal with cases of bullying is having evidence to be able to take forward. It is very hard to confront someone with comments they have made on social media if there are no screenshots, for example. So if someone does keep targeting you, please, please, please record it and share it with us. It makes everything so much simpler. Do also be aware that quite often, your own behaviour can also come under scrutiny during such an investigation. There is little moral high ground to be gained in accusing another girl of having bullied you when your own posts towards her have been insulting and abusive...

The next section we decided was necessary is entitled: WHAT SHOULD I DO? And very simply, the answer we came up with is:

*If you are being bullied, or you are worried that a friend is, you need to speak to an adult immediately, even if you are unsure.*

Even if you are not being bullied according to our definition, if something is upsetting you, however small you feel it may be, speak up! Speak to any adult you feel comfortable with in school. Very simply, we can do nothing to help you unless you talk to us. You will all have seen the 'Feeling Worried' posters in every classroom. You have Form Tutors, Heads of Year, me, the Wellbeing Centre, your Subject

Teachers - all sorts of people to approach. It only takes you speaking to one of them. And it is really important that you know that if you do, you will be taken seriously.

I think that we have excellent relationships between staff and pupils at Tormead. Your half-termly one to ones with tutors, the daily interaction you have in lessons, the fact that your Heads of Year are always on hand to speak to you privately if you want to. But we cannot possibly know what is going on for you unless you tell us - and nor can we help you unless we know.

Of course, you can also speak to your friends or other adults in your life - but if it's happening with people at school, then staff here are best placed to help. You probably do not know that staff receive training in our approach to bullying every year - but they do. We know how it can affect people in horrible ways - and we will do whatever we can to put a stop to it.

A really important discussion happened in our group about how bullying was handled. Again, the full policy makes this really clear, but girls were not fully aware. Staff at School want to and will help you. At Tormead, we normally follow a mediation process to sort things out between you and the person who is affecting you: we follow the same one for dealing with a friendship fallout or conflict as we do in cases of bullying. To make this clear, we speak to you and then we speak to the bully. This helps us to get both perspectives. What may feel crushing to you sometimes comes as a complete surprise to others who might be unaware of its effects. Alternatively, they might be fully aware of the hurt they are causing, in which case this process sets very clear boundaries and makes them understand that such behaviour will not be tolerated. The next step - and this is the really important and powerful one - is that we then create a safe environment in which to bring you together to address the situation. I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of girls here are empathetic and kind in nature - this is normally the point at which we are able to make clear how their actions are having an impact upon others and find a pathway to making them better. This also gives us the opportunity to underline that this sort of behaviour is totally unacceptable. This is really important - there are a few people in this world who do not understand others' feelings but at least if we can make clear to them that this will not be tolerated, that sends a very strong message in itself. And please all of you be clear - the Tormead community is 100% against bullying of any kind, and will not accept it.

Of course, speaking face to face with the person who is upsetting you, on whatever level, might not be high on the list of things you want to do but this is a time to be brave and stand up for yourself and your feelings. We will not put you into a situation you feel overwhelmed by or feel you cannot handle but it really is important for

everyone to get feelings into the open - as with most conflicts in life, talking about things so often resolves them.

I should make very clear that the point of this mediation process is to resolve and stop the situation, not to punish. In the vast majority of cases, this approach is successful. However, if the bullying continues then a sanction may need to be used. This is important for both victims and perpetrators of bullying to hear.

One other area which the girls highlighted as an area of potential concern was who would then find out about it on the staff. It made me think that it might be useful to explain how we share information within school. Firstly, no member of staff will ever promise to keep your secret - we simply cannot for all sorts of reasons, the main one being that if you reveal something which suggest you may be in danger, we are bound by law to share it. However, most of what you discuss with us in a school context is not so drastic, I am happy to say. But we still need to share it and I think it important that you know how we do so. Every day, a record of the day's events is sent to all teaching staff - this tends to be one line summaries of issues which have arisen or potentially significant conversations we have had with you or your parents. This allows all staff to be aware that, for example, you and a friend had an issue at lunchtime or that you are struggling in English etc etc If we have that broad overview then we can take these things into account. Key pastoral staff will then have a more detailed picture of the situation, perhaps from fuller discussions or emails etc. It is important that Heads of Year know the detail of what is going on for the girls they look after as well as in the wider school context - schools that are open in sharing information are much better at helping the pupils in their care.

We also included a section about the follow-up. If you have been through something upsetting, it is important that we make sure that whatever we have done to address has worked - as well as give you plenty of opportunity to tell us if it hasn't. It is important to say that this will often apply to the bully as well as the victim - happy people don't bully others. Any further issues can then be dealt with swiftly.

We understand that it can be scary but we can and will help you. Bullying is completely unacceptable behaviour and we want to eliminate it but we need your help to do so. Unless you speak to us, we can do nothing. And while I am talking on this topic, this message applies in all sorts of other contexts - if you have a problem in an exam, or don't understand something in a lesson, or want some help in managing your time - speak up then and there! So many problems which come to us are so much harder for all involved to solve because we weren't told at the time. One thing that this document doesn't do, because my focus group - I think quite rightly - felt that it was not the place for it, is talk about all the things we do to prevent bullying. From 1 to 1s with tutors every half term to the range of support available in

the Wellbeing Centre, to mixing form and teaching groups regularly to PSHE and IT lessons to Peer Mentors and Supportive Friends to regular changing of seating plans - we do think about it and want to do whatever is necessary to stop it happening in the first place.

The last question on the survey asked you what more we could do to improve our culture of anti-bullying and the answers were interesting - I will be taking them forward as part of our ongoing pastoral provision. Happily, a few of the ideas given focused upon 'having an informative assembly' so hopefully the last few minutes will have satisfied those who suggested that - but there were a number of others, ranging from those focused on increased punishment for bullies to someone very wise who wrote 'The bullies sometimes need more help than those bullied'. Some of you wanted more involvement from staff, others thought teachers got too involved already; some said Tormead handled things well and didn't need to do anything differently, while one person wanted weekly anti-bullying sessions. As every survey inevitably shows, you cannot please everybody 100% of the time, but I am keen to ensure that we think very carefully about what you have told us you think would help. Hopefully the pupil version of the policy will be a good start.