

«I want to have good dreams»

*Children's and young people's hearing  
on bullying and offences at school*

Comments to the Djupedal Commission

The Ombudsman for Children – October 2014



BARNEOMBUDET

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## Introduction

10 % of children and young people are ridiculed or teased at school to such an extent that they experience feelings of sadness 2-3 times a month or more. The figures for bullying at school have remained stable over time. Severe and prolonged bullying and other offensive behaviour can have extremely serious consequences for children. In the worst cases, core rights such as the right to life, health, education and development are negatively affected.

*"I didn't say anything, I didn't do anything, my eyes were distant, I basically switched off my emotions and became passive and apathetic. Afterwards I had to get help to switch my emotions on again."*

*Young man, 19 years old*

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) grants children and young people the right to be heard in all matters affecting them. Bullying at school is an issue that first and foremost affects the child him/herself, even though bullying also has serious societal consequences. The Ombudsman believes that it is vital that the Djupedal Commission, who are to deliver a report on how to handle cases of bullying in schools in the future, place significant emphasis on the child's own experience of his/her encounter with the current system and on the child's recommendations for improvements. The voices of children and young people should be directly incorporated into the report: to this end, we had conversations with children and young people all over the country and compiled this report.

We met with 22 children and young people between the ages of 9 and 19. The majority were finishing primary school or starting lower secondary school (11-15 years of age). In our conversations with the children, we emphasised their encounters with the adults and the system that are supposed to stop bullying and offences taking place in schools. We have collated the children's experiences and their recommendations for improving the system in this report.

The report closely reflects the children's own experiences, and we have tried as far as possible to use the children's own words and formulations. However, at certain points we were constrained to add our own comments in order to make the report more legible. We have also reformulated some of the children's recommendations by merging several recommendations on the same topic.

It is important to stress that the report is based on the experiences of individual children and young people. We do not know the extent to which the attitudes of the children we spoke to are representative. What is extremely interesting and, we believe, lends greater weight to the children's recommendations, is that they correspond to a significant extent with recommendations from various experts in the anti-bullying and class management field.

In reports like this one, it should always be emphasised that the majority of pupils in Norwegian schools are happy at school and that many teachers, head teachers and municipalities do a lot of good work against bullying. But this report is not about the pupils who enjoy school and the schools that are doing a good job. This is a report on how pupils experience the times when the system fails them.

## Children's experiences

We have not primarily been concerned with investigating the children's experiences. We did not discuss the details of the events that took place. We also did not investigate the facts of each case, choosing instead to use the subjective experiences of the children as a starting point.

The children we talked to have all experienced something which for them was serious. The bullying took different forms. The majority experienced being ostracized and having very few or no friends at school for a period of time. Gossiping was commonplace. All were exposed to frequent offensive language and behaviour, often on a daily basis in certain periods. Bullying took place over different lengths of time, from a few months to several years.

A surprising number of children experienced violence and sexual assault/abuse by classmates; violence and abuse that went beyond punishable offences. Several pupils emphasised that psychological abuse over time was by far the worst:

*"Getting beat up doesn't hurt, but the psychological stuff really hurts. It ruins your life. Your life is stolen from you. It's loss of freedom, that's what bullying is."*

*Young man, 19 years old*

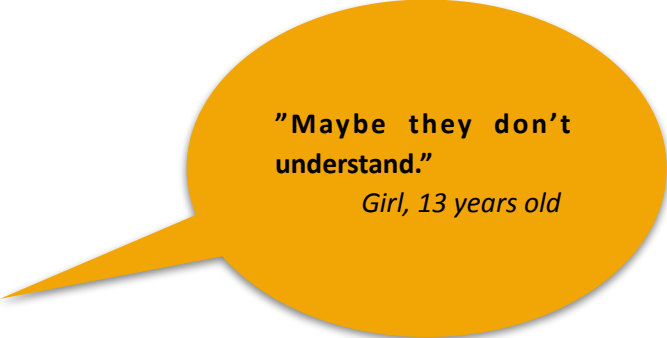
This tells us something about the severity of the situation and the importance of the school being in a position put a quick stop to the bullying. Failure to do so may have serious consequences for those affected.

There may be many reasons for bullying. In the majority of cases it seems that the decision to bully someone takes priority, the bully invents a "reason" later. There are however some recurring themes. "Poverty" is one such theme. Not being able to afford the "right" designer clothes can be enough reason for some to pick on others. Some of this appears to be connected to the ideal of being rich and beautiful, popular and successful; a significant theme among pupils at upper-primary level and at the start of lower-secondary school. Children from one-parent families seem to be particularly vulnerable. Being different – for example, a preference for playing with children of the opposite sex, or being from a Sami or other minority ethnic background – is something that may be looked upon negatively.

The most painful and violating experiences have this in common: Someone takes something dear to you, something you love and that is important and integral to your sense of identity: your safety or your body, your family, ethnic background or dress sense – and ridicules it. The pain this causes can have a permanent effect:

*"I want to have good dreams, now I'm always dreaming about what happened at my last school."*

*Girl, 11 years old*



**"Maybe they don't understand."**

*Girl, 13 years old*

## Not doing enough

The Education Act makes all adults in schools responsible for taking measures to stop bullying and offensive behaviour. Managerial staff must be alerted in any situation where a school employee receives information or suspects that a pupil is being exposed to offensive language or behaviour. Where a pupil or a parent requests that measures are taken to rectify conditions within the school's psychosocial environment, the school must come to a formal decision on the case as soon as possible.

This is not how the children we spoke to have experienced the system.

*"They have to start early with this. By grades 7 to 10 it's too late. By then the pupils have learned how the school works. For example, if there is a pupil in a wheelchair in one of the classes, they will have learned to take him/her into consideration right from the start. The pupils understand. The work has to be followed up at least twice a year to keep it up to date."*

*Young man, 19 years old*

## Being believed

*"I told the teachers, they just said "that wasn't very nice" but the pupils just kept doing it."*

*Young man, 17 years old*

*"The head teacher said I couldn't be being bullied because I seemed so happy."*

*Girl, 12 years old*

Many of the children and young people have experienced adults trivialising or dismissing what has happened. Many have also been told that “everything will be fine” or that what took place was “nothing serious”.

The children and young people talk about teachers who say that they cannot do anything about the situation because they did not witness it themselves and teachers who ask all the pupils to tell them what happened and then choose to take the word of the majority.

“The head teacher believes the adults, who didn’t see what happened, over me.”

*Boy, 13 years old*

A girl told us that she was being harassed in an outdoor area that was never supervised. There were always several pupils there but adults never ventured in behind the hedge; they were content to stand outside and ask if everything was OK. When the girl told one of the teachers that she was being badly bullied the teacher said that this could not have happened because they (the teachers) had not seen it happening. The teacher told the girl’s parents that she was happy at school, despite the fact that the girl had told the teacher several times about being bullied. This is just one example of how adults can close their eyes and ears to the problems of children and young people.

“Bullying happens in secret places. I don’t think the teachers know about those places. The teachers usually stay in the playground.”

*Boy, 12 years old*

Pupils who tell adults that they are being bullied experience that the adults lay the blame on them. Some children/young people who have been bullied take revenge and end up being the ones to get punished. Others are blamed because they do not have anyone to hang around with. One girl said that a teacher had told her that she was “cold”; another girl was called a “drama queen”. A boy told us how he eventually became a “problem child” because he was always getting into fistfights with the boys who bullied him. Many pupils have been treated like “tell-tales” by the adults at school. They are too easily offended and come running to the teacher with every little thing:

“Instead the teachers ask “what could you have done about that?” They suggest that I go and play with someone else.”

*Girl, 12 years old*

“The teacher asked me to stop whining. He said he was so fed up with all the girl drama. I answered that I should be allowed to be upset, that this was the first time I had experienced girl drama. He got angry at me and said that he was my teacher and shouted at me that I was not allowed to speak to him like that. He came up to me later and apologised but he said it front of the whole class so everyone knew there was something going on.”

*Girl, 15 years old*

Many pupils, who spoke out and were not taken seriously, stopped speaking out. For them, the initial “informing” was risky enough, and subsequently when they were not taken seriously, speaking out became too big a risk for them to take:

“You don’t always tell someone at school, because telling someone can also be a reason you get bullied.”

*Young man, 17 years old*

“It’s like being caught in a net. You can’t get out if you don’t say anything. If you say something and the net doesn’t go away, it just gets bigger.”

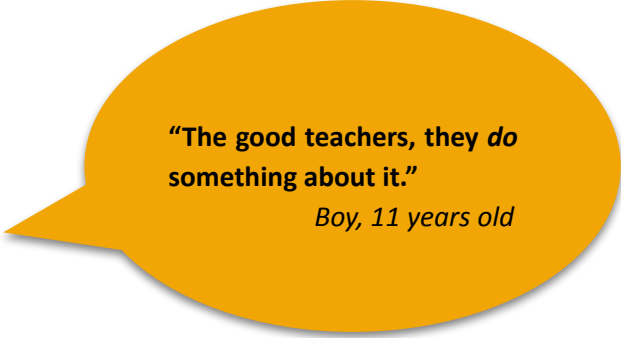
*Girl, 11 years old*

“I told Mum and Dad everything that happened at school. When they told the school, things just got worse. The head teacher didn’t care about what my parents said. It just got worse. Telling the school wasn’t taken seriously.”

*Girl, 14 years old*

## Young recommendations

- Listen more to the pupils than the adults
- The school should have regular “pupil reviews” where pupils can report bullying
- Schools have to employ school psychologists
- The school has to take measures to maintain a good class environment as early as the first few years of school. This has to be followed up at least twice a year to keep it up to date
- Teachers should be rewarded for handling cases of bullying
- Teachers can meet previous victims of bullying and listen to what they have to say
- The school should have a teacher dedicated to working with cases of bullying



**"The good teachers, they do something about it."**

*Boy, 11 years old*

## Who to confide in?

*"The best thing I did was to tell someone - I wouldn't be here if I hadn't done that."*

*Girl, 14 years old*

*"I didn't think there was anyone at school that I could talk to."*

*Boy, 11 years old*

Pupils who get bullied over longer periods of time are completely dependent on having someone at school that they can talk to about what is happening. Many of the pupils we met told us about the adults they could and could not talk to. However, many pupils have also experienced that meeting a person who took them seriously actually changed their lives. This could be a head teacher, a teacher, a school office employee or a health visitor. In this section we have collated some experiences with the different roles played by adults and views on who are the most helpful confidants.

The majority of the pupils tell us that their preferred first point of contact is their form teacher or another teacher whom they know well. Many find their teacher very helpful, others do not. It depends on whether the teacher is experienced as communicating clearly or not. The pupils see a distinct connection between how the teacher presents him/herself in the classroom and whether it is worthwhile asking this teacher for help. The pupils also have clear opinions about the adults who communicate clearly and those who do not.

The boy who said this had different experiences with two teachers. He felt that the teacher he had in primary five was a bad communicator who swept his problems under the rug.

He had made a list of all the bad names he had been called and kept a record of how many times he was called each name. When the list was complete, the teacher ripped it into four pieces and threw it in the rubbish bin without even looking at it. On one occasion he also reported being hit. The teacher said that she would make a note of it. A little later, when the teacher left the classroom, the pupil went over and looked at the sheet of paper. It was blank. She had not in fact made a note of anything.

The boy clearly emphasised the difference between his previous teacher and the teacher he has today:

*"The teacher I have now, she does something when things happen. She has control over the class so things calm down. She means what she says. We see this because she follows up on things that happen. She's strict too."*

*Boy, 11 years old*



The teachers who are clear communicators are present during breaks and go outside with the pupils. They talk to the pupils and are aware of how they are doing:

"I walked around by myself, sat down and thought about things. Nobody came over to me, not even the teachers. None of the teachers watch the kids playing or anything that is happening."

*Girl, 12 years old*

In primary 6 a new teacher came to this girl's school. He took the girl seriously and that helped. He asked what she could do and she said she could try to be nicer to the girl who was bullying her. He asked "why should you do that when she's not nice to you?" That felt good.

Some pupils have experienced being insulted by their own teachers. Although things may be said jokingly, it is still completely unacceptable:

"One teacher calls everyone who wears glasses "Specky Jesus". It's not funny. I said something but he still does it. He thinks it's just a joke."

*Boy, 12 years old*

"The school had special group lessons, but there were only two of us in the group. The other pupils called us the "spoon-fed group" and so did the teachers. The teachers said "Spoon-fed group? You can go to your maths class now."

*Girl, 14 years old*

Many pupils report more accessible school health services and more school counsellors. One girl told us that the school only offered her a meeting with the head teacher and she found it stressful to be the girl who "always goes to the head teacher". She would rather speak to the school counsellor or the health visitor but they are rarely in attendance at the school.

"We don't have a health visitor at the school. There should be one. Someone from the office staff kind of deals with anyone who hurts themselves. We can't talk to her; she is strict and never smiles, not even for school photos."

*Boy, 11 years old*

Other pupils experience being able to talk face-to-face with the head teacher as a good thing. One boy told us that he thinks it is easier to talk to the head teacher than to the health visitor. He felt that the head teacher understood the severity of his situation and prioritised it.

The fact that the head teacher is accessible and is trusted by the pupils is vital for pupils to be able to speak freely. A substantial number of pupils experience their head teacher as distant and perhaps a little scary:

*"I never spoke to the head teacher and he never spoke to me. I didn't dare to speak to him - I didn't know him. He never talked to me. He knew I was being bullied."*

*Girl, 14 years old*

The children we spoke to would like the adults to monitor situations, set clear boundaries and follow up by enforcing clear consequences. They are the ones who are in a position to prevent bullying and harassment. Whether it is the teacher, a member of the office staff or someone from school health services is of lesser importance. Children who have switched teacher, class or school are extremely surprised by how "little" it takes to bring about change.

*"Our teacher showed us a sheet of paper and said we could spit on it, stamp on it, crumple it - but not tear it. Then she asked us to try and straighten it out again, but it was impossible to smooth out all the creases. Then she said this is what it's like when someone gets bullied. There should be a teacher who goes into all classes and does this from primary 1 to primary 7 - right up until upper secondary. And they need to do it more than once."*

*Boy, 11 years old*

## Young recommendations

- **Get a handle on things right away**
- **The consequences have to be clear and the pupils have to be aware of them**
- **Talk to the pupils, watch them and ask them how they are doing**
- **There have to be enough adults outside. The adults have to be where the pupils are and be able to see what is going on**
- **A good teacher is one who can speak calmly to pupils who are upset, even if the pupils are rude to them**
- **A teacher who knows how to deal with bullying has to work with bullying full-time – with all classes**
- **The teachers have to work on the case until it is resolved**
- **All the teachers have to receive training once a year/every six months on how to deal with cases of bullying**

## Experiences of anti-bullying measures

Many of the children we spoke to have experienced anti-bullying measures. None of them knew whether or not the school had reached a decision on their case but they noticed that things were happening at their school. Experiences with different measures varied but several pupils told us that they found such measures stressful. In this section, we have collated some examples of measures that have worked and some that have not. Measures that pupils experienced as stressful and ineffective may contribute to making an already difficult school day even more difficult. This emphasises how important it is for the school to carry out frequent assessments of measures together with the pupils.

A pupil who had experienced being bullied for a long period of time received help when his mother contacted the Educational and Psychological Counselling service (PPT). They came in and explained to the school what they were going to do. The PPT counsellor had expertise in dealing with bullying. The PPT discovered who was responsible and contacted the parents. The class was assigned a new teacher who monitored the situation more closely. The pupil felt that he could speak to him.

The PPT arranged training at the school. In the meantime, the pupil was absent. One of the most important things the PPT did was to supervise break times and make sure that the pupil always had someone he could go to.

The same pupil told us that he got angry when teachers supervised him. It made everyone else realise that he was the one who was being bullied. They should have supervised the bully instead.

Another pupil became aware of a major change when the school started using “9a forms”. If one pupil bullies another, the teacher has to fill in a form that is sent to the parents. The form describes what took place and how the victim feels about it. The school fills in the form during break times so the bully also loses his/her break time. If the parents of the bully do nothing, the bully and his/her parents have to attend a meeting with the teacher. The pupil told us that there is less bullying now that there is a system governing how the school handles such cases.



**“So I was the one  
who got punished.”**

*Boy, 11 years old*

The pupil who said this told us about a measure that did not work as well. The head teacher assigned an extra teacher but that just made things worse. The boy doing the bullying did not like this teacher following him around so the teacher started following around the boy who had been bullied instead. The latter boy experienced this as a punishment specifically aimed at him; he found it exhausting to be followed around by a teacher all the time. Several pupils talk about similar experiences: It is important to the pupils that measures are aimed first and foremost at the bully. Pupils who have been on the receiving end of bullying and harassment are extra wary about measures that may stigmatise them.

Several pupils told us about anti-bullying measures that did not work, and that may even have contributed to making the offence even worse. A girl who was the victim of cyber-bullying told us that the school decided to hold a meeting between all the involved parties. All the girls who had been bullying her online were put in a room with her. The pupils sat unattended in the meeting room while they waited for the head teacher. The other girls did not bully her directly while they sat in the room but they dropped hints. For example one of the girls said, within earshot of the victim, that having such a

meeting was “dumb”, others rolled their eyes. Finally the head teacher arrived and talked for the duration of the meeting. The head teacher said that the bullies should apologise. They have not done so. The girl who was bullied felt completely alone at the meeting. In retrospect she feels that she should have been allowed to bring someone with her and to wait in a separate room with a teacher. She was never asked if she wanted to have a meeting and whether she herself wanted to participate; the head teacher just decided that “everyone involved” had to be at the meeting. The girl thinks the school should have demanded that the bullies apologise during the meeting when the teachers were present. The head teacher could also have had a meeting alone with the other girls.

Afterwards, the school did not ask what the girl thought about the way things were handled. Nor has she received any feedback from the school about what is going to happen next. The Facebook group that the girls created to bully her still exists.

This girl’s experience is sadly not unique. Many of the pupils were neither asked questions nor consulted in situations where the school had to work out measures, and were not allowed to play a part in evaluating any such measures. We have also spoken to pupils who feel that they were pressured into “cooperating” or “coming to an agreement” with the children/young people who bullied them, even though this did nothing to stop the harassment, for example, one boy told us:

*“At conflict resolution I was pressured into agreeing; if I did not agree they would write that I had been uncooperative. The only compensation I got was that the girl who broke my arm had to say sorry, shake my hand and promise not to do it again. It was complete nonsense.”*

*Boy, 19 years old*

## Young recommendations

- It may be good for the person being bullied to change class or school if there are multiple bullies in the class or at the school
- Teachers should not supervise the person who reports the bullying – they should supervise the bully. It is embarrassing to do activities and be supervised by a teacher during breaks
- Changing form teacher can help
- Do not implement measures if you do not know that they work or if the results cannot be measured
- Avoid measures that make the victim of bullying look uncooperative
- Pupils must be listened to when the school is deciding on measures
- Pupils have to be involved in evaluating measures
- There have to be clear consequences for the bully/bullies, not measures that can be experienced as rewards, for example:
  - Talk to the parents of the bully/bullies
  - Sometimes the bully should be moved to another class or school
  - Take bullies into a room. Show them what bullying is. Talk about friendship
  - The school has to have an anti-bullying system, e.g. if a pupil bullies someone five times, the bully should get a black mark and a phone call home to his/her parents
  - It's good to separate the bullies from the rest of the class but don't reward the bullies! Don't remove the person being bullied
  - Investigate the bully's home environment. There could be something wrong at home
  - Pupils have to learn about their rights. If you are bullied you should be given an information sheet about your rights

## Consequences?

A girl told us what she did after being bullied at school for several years:

*"I went to the head teacher and threatened to change schools. I said I would go to the local newspaper. I screamed at the head teacher."*

*Girl, 15 years old*

This was the turning point for this girl. Things got better after this. She took matters into her own hands. Although many pupils talk about similar turning points, not all pupils or parents are as strong as this. We asked all the pupils what they thought should happen to make the school realise the severity of the situation and really get to grips with bullying. We gave the majority of the pupils examples of different kinds of reactions, without expressing an opinion on whether the reaction was positive or negative. We have linked some comments to many of the pupils' recommendations in addition to their validity as stand-alone comments on the work of the Djupedal Commission:

### **- Schools that fail to stop bullying should be fined**

The pupils suggest different systems and different levels of fines. Among the pupils' arguments for fining schools is the observation that enforcing fines is a language that adults understand because then there would be less money for other things. Many pupils also emphasise that a head teacher who is repeatedly fined should not be allowed to continue in his/her job. Some of the pupils thought fines would not work and had more faith in training adults at the school to recognise the signs they should be looking for.

### **-The school must receive external help to start the process and get things moving**

Outside parties have to monitor the school until they are satisfied that it is managing to cope. They may have to make surprise visits to the school so that the school cannot just "pretend that everything is fine."

### **-The Government should crack down hard on schools that fail to stop bullying; someone else has to come in and run the school**

Outside parties who come to the school must have authority. If they come in from outside without any authority, they will not be able to help. If they have authority, the school cannot just give up.

### **- Bully-free schools should advise other schools**

The pupils know that there are major differences between schools. Many pupils have experiences from different schools and know that they have very different ways of working. One recommendation therefore is that those schools that are unable to stop bullying must get help from the schools that have been successful.

### **- The head teacher could be threatened with dismissal if he/she does not resolve things**

Several pupils mentioned that a head teacher who does not do a good enough job should be threatened with dismissal. Others also suggested more moderate measures in terms of head teachers, for example that municipal heads could administer training for head teachers.

### **- Children/young people who have been bullied should receive a proper apology from the school**

Many pupils never get an apology from the school after serious cases of bullying. They have slightly different views on this but many told us that they would like a proper apology, preferably from the head teacher, as an acknowledgement that what they had to go through was not acceptable. Others say that an apology is not enough and that more has to be done to rectify what took place.

**- Schools that fail to stop bullying should be obligated to talk to the PPT or another party who can help**

The school has to get involved when the PPT intervenes and says that the school has to do something. Someone should be able to order the school to seek advice from the PPT or another qualified party.

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Pupil Survey 2013. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.  
The Education Act, § 9a-3

