

Case study: Dealing with bullying

Jo McHale

MPhil CPsychol Certified Trainer in Nonviolent Communication

Context

A teacher is supervising young children in the playground. S/he overhears one young person using an angry tone to describe another as 'a bully'.

How should the teacher handle the situation?

The 'detective' approach

It's all too easy to adopt the role of detective, asking ourselves:

- What happened?
- Who started it?
- What should I do now to deter and punish? (often accompanied by a threat such as 'If you don't stop, I will')

Some assumptions that can underlie the 'detective' approach

- There is a victim and a perpetrator.
- It is possible to identify the victim and perpetrator.
- The teacher/adult is responsible for sorting things out.
- An apology will restore relationships.
- A reprimand/punishment will stop the undesirable behaviour.
- Young people deserve punishment when they contravene the rules.

Possible internal and unspoken dialogue going on in the adult

- 'That's really unacceptable behaviour' (Judgment)
- 'What should I do about it now?' (Anxiety)
- 'How dare he speak like that' (Anger and judgment)
- 'Why does this have to happen when I'm on duty' (Self-pity and/or desire for a quiet life)

- ‘Who knows what would happen if I let them get away with it’ (Fear)
- ‘OK, let’s see what’s going on and sort things out’ (Assumption that someone in an authority role must take charge and decide what the outcome will be.)

Possible consequences of such assumptions and internal dialogue

1. The behaviour might stop temporarily, but the root cause is not addressed
2. The young person identified as perpetrator is likely to feel aggrieved and resentful – and wanting their side of the story to be more fully understood. They may seek revenge later – when the teacher isn't there.
3. The threat of punishment or other negative consequences
4. Acting out of anger, anxiety or fear is likely to worsen the situation rather than improve it.

An alternative way of dealing with the situation

1. First, the adult gives herself some ‘emergency empathy’ to identify the feelings and needs that underlie her anger, disapproval, fear, anxiety, etc. This will enable her to set aside any punitive energy and to be able to listen carefully to those involved in the incident.
2. She expresses her feelings and needs to the young person who has labelled another young person as a bully.
3. She checks that she has been heard in the way she intended.
4. She then listens for the feelings and needs behind the words the young person uses and expresses empathy. (NB this does not mean that she condones the behaviour.)
5. When she believes that the young person has had the experience of being fully heard, without judgment, she makes a suggestion and asks if the young person would be willing to act on it.
6. Later, when both young people are together, she helps them speak to each other without blame and accusation, using instead their feelings and needs.

Imaginary dialogue

Dialogue	Interpretation and commentary
<p>Teacher: When you called Saffi a bully just now, I felt sad. I would like us all to speak to each other without using labels that can be hurtful.</p> <p>I'd like to know what it's like to hear me say this, so would you tell me what you've heard me say?</p>	<p>Expressing her feelings and needs (and recognising the sadness that so often underlies anger)</p> <p>Checks how she has been heard</p>
<p>Young person (YP) <i>You're saying that I shouldn't talk like that.</i></p>	<p>This reply suggests that YP has heard a judgment.</p>
<p>Teacher: (patiently and courteously) Thank you for telling me what you've heard. I would like you to hear me differently. Let me try again.</p> <p>What I want you to hear is that I'm sad because I want us to treat each other with respect. Respect is important to me. To me, calling people names doesn't show respect.</p> <p>(Gently) Would you tell me again what you've heard me say?</p>	<p>Tries to express her feelings and needs in a way that the YP hears as she intended to be heard.</p> <p>Checks again what the YP has heard.</p>
<p>YP <i>You want us to stop calling each other names because it's not respectful.</i></p>	<p>YP reflects back with greater accuracy.</p>
<p>Teacher: Yes, that's what I wanted to get across – and I'm really glad that you've heard me that way.</p> <p>I want us to be honest with each other. I want us to be able to tell people what's upsetting us and what we want in a way that's respectful and without calling each other names.</p> <p>Would you like this too?</p>	<p>Acknowledges that she has been heard as she wishes and reinforces her needs.</p> <p>Invites young person to begin thinking about what she needs, too.</p>
<p>YP (Heatedly) <i>You didn't hear what he said.</i></p>	<p>YP isn't yet ready to think about her needs. She is still smarting from some perceived injustice that had triggered her 'you're a bully' remark.</p>

Teacher: Are you feeling angry and upset and wanting people to be kind to you?	Teacher is listening for YP's feelings and needs, and makes a guess about what they are.
YP <i>He's always getting at me – and at my friends.</i>	YP gives more information about what's upsetting her.
Teacher: I'd like to understand what you mean by 'getting at you'. What does he do?	Teacher avoids going down the sympathy or reassurance route and instead, seeks more clarity and focus.
YP <i>He told me to get out of his way so that he could play with his friends – but not with me, because he said I was just pathetic.</i>	YP explains.
Teacher: Ah, I see. Were you feeling disappointed because you wanted to join in and play?	Teacher guesses at feelings and needs. Avoids reassurance.
YP <i>It's always like this.</i>	YP continues with their story.
Teacher: So there are other times when you want to join in?	Teacher stays present to what YP is saying, and shows empathy by guessing at what lies behind the YP's words.
YP <i>Yes, lots of times.</i>	YP agrees with teacher's guess.
Teacher: I guess you really want to play in that game and you're upset when you can't?	Teacher continues to show empathy by making a further guess.
YP <i>Yeah, I'm really good at it – I know I can play it as well as the others.</i>	YP reveals more about what is on her mind.
Teacher So maybe you're puzzled and wonder why you don't get to play.	Teacher again shows empathy by making a further guess.
YP <i>Why doesn't he like me? Why does he keep calling me names?</i>	YP gives more clues about her state of mind.
Teacher: Maybe you're also sad and upset because you like people to say what's on their mind instead of calling you names.	Teacher is still demonstrating that she is listening carefully and compassionately to YP.

YP (with more energy) Yes. I want him to talk properly to me.	YP's tone suggests that the nub of the matter is now emerging.
Teacher: Ah, I see. (Short silence) I wonder whether you could say this to him – tell him how you feel and what you'd like. Would you be willing to do that?	Teacher expresses understanding. The short silence allows YP to continue if she wants to. Teacher makes a suggestions and checks that YP is not hearing it as a directive.
YP (with some reluctance) I don't know.	YP expresses some reluctance.
Teacher: Does it seem a bit scary? You want to be safe?	Teacher empathises with the reluctance.
YP (shyly) Yes. Will you be there?	YP acknowledges her feelings and indirectly asks for support.
Teacher: You'd feel more comfortable if I was there?	Teacher picks up on the indirect request and clarifies it, empathically.
YP Yes.	YP accepts the support.
Teacher: OK, I'm willing to do that. Shall we go and sort it out now?	Both teacher and YP are ready for the next step.
When the teacher and young person get together with the child labelled as the 'bully', the teacher's role will be to enable both young people to hear each other's feelings and needs, without blame, criticism and judgment. Once they have heard each other to their mutual satisfaction, they can then decide what to do next. In most cases they will be able to make suggestions for themselves. The teacher is there as a facilitator of a conversation, not as detective, judge or arbitrator.	

How does this sound to you?

1. *This seems a very long winded process!*

This might well seem to be a lengthy process because it's rather different from the action we habitually take.

We tend to make our own interpretation about what is going on, and then take immediate action on the basis of that interpretation, in the belief that we can deal quickly with the situation.

But this can have drawbacks.

- We may base our interpretation on a very partial understanding of what is happening
- We might act with punitive energy.
- We don't teach the young people how to mediate their own disputes.

The alternative – which is a process that could initially take some time – brings considerable benefits in the longer term. I like it because it teaches valuable lessons such as taking responsibility and repairing harm.

2. I'm not happy with all this empathy. Why don't we just tell the young person what's right and wrong - what's acceptable and not acceptable?

When a young person experiences themselves as being judged, they are likely to react defensively or clam up.

Showing empathy helps them to understand themselves better and to identify what is driving their behaviour. They can then find ways of expressing themselves and meeting their needs – ways that are respectful of other people.

Do you want a young person to do what you deem to be right just because you say so – or because they have internalised the value system on which the judgment is based. I am nervous of young people learning to acquiesce to the demands of authority figures. I prefer them to learn to base their behaviour on values that enrich life.

3. If they've done something wrong, shouldn't they be punished?

Is a punishment intended to change a person's behaviour? If so, there may be more reliable ways of effecting that change – and ways that don't trigger resentment and angry feelings that will show themselves in unpredictable ways.

Is the punishment intended to teach them a lesson? If so, what sort of lesson does it teach? It's likely to train the young person to do whatever they can to avoid being found out.

The alternative is a restorative rather than a retributive approach. It sends the message that the consequences of doing something deemed unacceptable are that the young person accepts responsibility for what they've done, understands what led to the behaviour and then takes steps to put things right.

Dialogue adapted from an example in 'The Compassionate Classroom' by Sura Hart and Victoria Kindle Hodson and supplemented with my own comments.

Looking for more articles and case studies illustrating Nonviolent Communication in action?

You'll find lots of them on www.jo-mchale.com/resources