

Written evidence submitted by Kidscape (CWSB174)

Response to the Call for Evidence: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

The case for considering anti-bullying measures as part of this Bill

Introduction

1.1 [Kidscape](#) was founded in 1985 by Michelle Elliott OBE, a psychologist passionate about preventing harm to children by equipping them with the techniques to keep themselves safe. We are proud to be the longest-running anti-bullying charity in England and Wales. Kidscape helps children, families, education professionals, and the wider children's workforce with advice, training, and tools to prevent bullying and protect young lives. Kidscape's vision is for all children to grow up in supportive communities, safe from bullying and harm. We are core members of the [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#), who have over 200 members, and our CEO, Paula Timms sits on their advisory group.

1.2 Through our Parent Advice Line and online workshops, we hear the experiences of hundreds of families who contact us each year. This submission is based on those experiences and the relevant research.

Executive Summary

2.1 Kidscape acknowledges the many positive changes that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will make to the education system. We fully understand that for the most vulnerable children, school can be a protective environment, and in these cases, it is appropriate to ensure that they are in school every day, monitored by staff, and safeguarded.

2.2 It is an uncomfortable truth that for many young people, school is not a place of safety. Rather than being a 'rite of passage', bullying is a complex, potentially serious social issue, requiring a multi-faceted response. Being protected from bullying is a fundamental human right.

2.3 We are deeply concerned that the Bill, as it stands, is a missed opportunity to address school bullying at a whole-school level and the wellbeing and safety of the many children and young people who experience bullying.

2.4 Whilst we can see the intended impact of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill on ensuring that those children who would be safer in school, are protected, we would like the government to go further to address the safety and well-being of children whilst they are in school.

2.5 Based on the evidence outlined below, we strongly believe the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should be enhanced to include specific mention of anti-bullying measures.

2.6 Our submission focuses on Part 2: Schools.

Bullying as a well-being and safeguarding issue - prevalence

3.1 We appreciate the commitment from this child-centred government to make sure that every school across our country is a safe environment for children to learn however the Good Childhood Report with data from the PISA assessment found that a high proportion of pupils in the UK reported feeling unsafe at school, placing the country as the sixth highest in country rankings for this concern. Out of the 27 countries studied, the UK ranked 5th from the bottom for pupils' sense of belonging, with many feeling lonely at school. The UK also had the second-highest level of bullying in Europe, trailing only one country in the listⁱ.

3.2 The latest figures (November 2024) from the Anti-Bullying Alliance, analysed by Goldsmiths, University of London, showed that 23% of the almost 45,000 children surveyed across England experienced frequent bullyingⁱⁱ.

3.3 Bullying often targets a real, or perceived difference and therefore different social groups are at higher risk of experiencing bullying, ie. LGBTQ+ pupils, pupils with SEND, ethnic minorities, and children eligible for free school meals. School bullying often exacerbates the issues that these groups already face and widens the gap between them and their peers.

3.4 According to a Women and Equalities Committee report (2018), 29% of 16- to 18-year-old girls experienced unwanted sexual touching in school, 59% of 13- to 21-year-old girls said they faced some form of sexual harassment in the past year, and 71% of 16- to 18-year-olds report hearing gendered insults on a regular basisⁱⁱⁱ. In 2020 Everyone's Invited revealed the shocking extent of this issue^{iv}.

Bullying as a well-being and safeguarding issue - impact

4.1 Research has consistently found a relationship between being bullied and poor mental health, including higher levels of depression, anxiety, and a greater risk of suicidal thoughts. We know that chronic bullying can have a profound impact on young people, and in many cases, this can be long-lasting, right into adulthood. Our own research, conducted by the University of York, has shown that chronic bullying can be conceptualised as a traumatic experience^v.

4.2 At Kidscape we regularly hear from families whose children are being bullied and are not believed and not supported, or despite interventions the bullying has continued. These

young people are often frightened of setting foot into school, for fear of physical or verbal attacks, and they may express suicidal ideation.

- 4.3 Often the impact of the bullying leads to persistent, long-lasting emotional and mental health difficulties that impacts learning and may be considered as SEN. In these situations, the families are thrown into the complex situation of trying to obtain appropriate SEN support.
- 4.4 Bullying victimisation can also be physically harmful, with bullied children reporting more stomach aches, headaches, and mouth sores.^{vi}
- 4.5 Unsurprisingly bullying can have a significant impact on a young people's school experience. Being bullied is associated with poorer academic achievement.^{vii} Young people who are chronically bullied in school are less likely to feel safe in school, less likely to report liking school, and less likely to feel like they belong in school. Additionally, research has indicated that bullied children have lower educational qualifications and a lower income at age 50.^{viii}
- 4.6 Bullying is a significant factor in youth violence, with 25% of children who perpetrated violence citing it as their motivation. Importantly, the perpetration of bullying is also associated with similar social, emotional, and long-term life consequences to those young people victimised by bullying.^{ix}
- 4.7 The recent Child Safeguarding Panel Annual Review Report states that early indicators of extrafamilial harm such as bullying by peers was often overlooked by professionals. The data analysis from rapid reviews relating to children's mental health identified cases where children had a mental health condition(s) and had experienced a range of contextual issues such as missing education, bullying and online harms.^x This shows that bullying should not be dismissed as a trivial experience, and should be well understood by all professionals as a potential safeguarding issue (child-on-child abuse).
- 4.8 Research from the University of York has found evidence of the impact, not just on the child, but the whole family.^{xi} Families have reported emotional impact on siblings, parental relationship difficulties, and in some cases being unable to work due to the time commitment and stress of supporting their child through chronic bullying. As one parent, working in academia stated to our advice line "How can I concentrate on work knowing that my child is spending her breaktimes hiding in the toilet?"

Children Not in School due to bullying

- 5.1 An estimated 111,700 children are being home-educated, based on a 2024 census - marking a 20% rise from 2023. 13% of families say they made this decision because of school dissatisfaction with 3% explicitly stating bullying.^{xii}

- 5.2 For many families whom we speak to, home education isn't a choice but a necessity. Often they would much rather that their child is in school, and are left with seemingly no option but to remove them from the school environment to ensure their safety. They feel that it is the only way they feel that their child can be kept safe and supported to recover from the trauma they have experienced. These parents care deeply for their children and are making huge decisions impacting their whole family.
- 5.3 We welcome the more robust data that the Children Not in School register will hopefully collect regarding reasons for home education. We hope that data collection from the Children Not in School register ensures that in situations where a child has been withdrawn from school with the reason given as bullying, support can be offered to the child to mitigate the impact of bullying, and there can be more scrutiny of the schools where the situation has occurred. We would recommend that schools are required to engage with the Local Authority and appropriate agencies to ensure that policies and practice can be reviewed and improved.
- 5.4 It is concerning that Section 436G: Support, states that support provided will be whatever the Local Authority sees fit. We would like this to be amended to ensure that in cases where families who are home educating due to a bullying situation, and ask for support, that the professionals involved have been trained in child development, SEND and bullying-related trauma. There should be greater clarity and guidance in regards to the type of support that may be available.

Bullied children and school disruption

- 6.1 Kidscape often hears from families who are encouraged to move their child to another school, or a managed move is suggested, but often this is not a straightforward option due to logistical issues, not being able to access a place due to schools being oversubscribed, or widespread cyberbullying that has gone beyond the current school environment. Many families simply do not feel that their child should be the one who must move.

Long-term bullying-related absences

- 7.1 We are greatly concerned about the many children who are on a school roll experiencing long-term bullying-related absences. These children are not in scope of the Children Not in School register.
- 7.2 Currently we do not have the data available to be certain of the numbers of children that are impacted, although we know from research that bullying is a substantial cause of school absence. Research in 2011 by Natcen, Red Balloon Learning Centres and the Anti-Bullying Alliance^{xiii} showed that at any one time over 16,000 young people aged 11-15 are missing education where the primary reason for the absence was bullying. A further 77,950 young people may be absent from school where bullying is a contributory factor to their absence. In the Youth Endowment Fund's 2024 survey^{xiv}, 30% of children in education or training say they've been persistently absent (absent for 10% or more of the

time) in the past school term. Bullying was cited as the reason for 7.3% and “I feel unsafe due to fear of violence at school” in 4.9% of cases.

7.3 Often these absences are recorded as ‘unauthorised’ or ‘illness’, and it is impossible to differentiate between a child in hospital with a broken leg and a child traumatised by a bullying experience that they are simply too scared to attend school. Unless the processes are in place to collect this information then we have no idea of the true scale of the issue. Simply categorising these children as ‘EBSA’ or ‘school refusal’ is not helpful either as it masks the true nature of a bullying situation. Young people need to feel heard, understood and supported.

7.4 Kidscape regularly hears from families of young people such as M, aged 15, a young carer, in the North-West of England who had experienced chronic emotional, physical and cyberbullying leaving her too scared to attend school. The school suggested that M would need to be escorted by a member of staff for a while or not attend as it was not safe. Further suggestions included moving to another local mainstream school, however these options were not viable due to distance involved and the potential links that peers in the new school had with the perpetrators. Despite being on the school roll and having been absent for many months, the school had not informed the Local Authority and no support was in place for M despite being known to many agencies. M had made several suicide attempts due to the bullying situation and her family were desperate.

7.5 In another scenario, B, a young person in Greater London was being bullied due to his neurodivergence. B and his parents reported every incident to the school and the fact that bullying was impacting his emotional well-being - he was becoming increasingly anxious and had severely restricted his eating. The school said that as there was no evidence (unfortunately the very nature of many bullying situations is that it happens covertly), there was nothing they could do apart from allow B to start school later and leave earlier than his peers, and he could go to the Head of Year’s office at break times. B has been absent from school for a number of weeks and his attendance is currently 80%.

Bullying – difficulties for schools

8.1 Kidscape works closely with many schools across England and Wales and we appreciate the complexities for schools in managing a bullying situation, including, but not limited to:

- Schools not wanted to be viewed as having a bullying problem.
- Complexity of bullying situations extending across many young people, including online content, making it hard to manage.
- Staff time.
- Staff training and confidence.
- Issues in defining bullying and young person/parent’s view of bullying not aligning with the school’s view.
- Lack of evidence of incidents.

- Lack of effectiveness of behaviour sanctions ie. a young people may be put in isolation or have a fixed term exclusion for perpetrating a serious bullying incident but this may not be effective in changing their behaviour.
- Lack of support/involvement from other relevant agencies such as the Police.

Problems with current policy

9.1 Government anti-bullying guidance, “Preventing and Tackling Bullying”^{xv} has not been updated since 2017, and the current guidance is non-statutory. Some aspects of the guidance give schools a great deal of autonomy, for example in respect of recording incidents of bullying the guidance states “We want schools to exercise their own judgment as to what will work best for their pupils.”

9.2 Although bullying is referred to in “Keeping Children Safe in Education”^{xvi} as a form of child-on-child abuse, in practice schools often don’t view serious bullying as a safeguarding issue, even when there is clear evidence that the child has experienced harm. We often hear from families who have contacted multiple professionals about the bullying their child has experienced (GP, Police etc.) and have found a lack of joined-up thinking, with severe cases of bullying still very much seen as something that will be sorted out by the school.

9.3 Kidscape hears of varying responses from schools and other agencies to bullying situations. Whilst we understand that each situation is individual and that schools will be best placed to understand the particular issues within their student population, we do feel that clearer guidance is needed. In some cases, a significant amount of emotional support is offered to the target, which can be helpful but unlikely to be adequate if it fails to address the peer group dynamics. Often, we hear that targets of bullying feel like they aren’t being believed or are being blamed by education professionals with suggestions that they should be more resilient. In many cases schools appear to struggle as to how to keep the young person safe and maintain their education, often resulting in suggesting they should move classes, that their timetables change, their school day is shortened, or they are educated in isolation away from peers for their own safety.

9.4 Families of bullied young people tell us that they try hard to communicate their concerns to the school in an effective manner and often speak to the school as soon as they become aware of the issue. Whilst we respect that there are schools that will treat these issues seriously and respond immediately with a clear plan of support, there are others who, for whatever reason, do not. In these situations, often the relationship between parents and schools becomes difficult and parents are left feeling like they have little option other than to follow the school’s official complaints process, which can be stressful and time-consuming and may do little to resolve the original bullying issue.

9.5 The link between chronic bullying and school attendance difficulties is not clearly referenced in the current attendance guidance^{xvii} which also doesn’t provide any practical guidance to schools, parents or young people. The guidance on mental health impacting attendance^{xviii} is more comprehensive and holistic but makes no mention of bullying.

9.6 “Preventing and Tackling Bullying” states that “In extreme cases, where the effects of bullying are so severe that it is not possible to reintegrate a child back into their school, then other arrangements must be made for the pupil to continue their education. In the first instance this may involve the transfer of the child to another mainstream school. Where a child has developed complex needs as a result of bullying, which cannot be met in mainstream education, then alternative provision may need to be arranged.” Unfortunately, there are no clear practical guidelines as to how this should be arranged and whose responsibility it is, given that the guidance is non-statutory. Parents inform us that they struggle with school moves due to oversubscribed schools and alternative provision requests are turned down.

9.7 Often when dealing with a bullying-related absence, the relationship between families and schools may be strained, and parents are desperate for support in ensuring that their child can attend school safely. It is therefore unhelpful for parents to be seeking information from their Local Authority to find that (as in many cases), the Local Authority’s information for parents in relation to support simply states the legal duty to ensure their child attends school regularly, information about prosecution and reference to the issue as ‘truanting’.

Our recommendations

10.1 As advisory group members of the Anti-Bullying Alliance we support the ABA’s policy recommendations^{xix} in relation to training, accountability and research and evidence as detailed below.

10.2 **Comprehensive anti-bullying training for school staff.** Provide anti-bullying training for all school staff including mandating it as part of initial teacher training, to equip educators with the skills to prevent and address bullying. There should also be a requirement for Ofsted inspectors and other relevant professionals (ie. nurses, GPs, residential care home staff) to receive anti-bullying training.

10.3 **Introduce a duty to record bullying incidents.** Require schools to record bullying incidents to track the scale of the issue nationwide and develop targeted interventions. The current guidance is not robust enough and leaves not keeping written records of bullying an option for schools. In addition, there should be a duty to record school absences related to bullying for the reasons discussed in sections 7 and 9 above.

10.4 **Schools should have a senior member of staff responsible for a whole-school approach to promoting preventing and responding to bullying,** in a similar manner to a SENCo, as well as an appointed school governor who is responsible for a whole-school approach to bullying.

10.5 **The government should undertake a national anti-bullying survey,** conducted annually, to understand levels of bullying in England.

10.6 In addition, Kidscape’s work with parents and carers has informed the following recommendations.

10.7 **Local Authorities should provide support to families and schools to ensure that young people with long-term bullying-related absences are able to return to school safely.** In instances where a young person has a long-term bullying-related school absence, the school must inform the Local Authority of this and the reason for the absence. Appropriately trained Local Authority staff should support with planning to re-integrate the young person back into school safely, and these staff should have a comprehensive understanding of bullying-related trauma.

10.8 **Independent advocacy or mediation services should be made available** to parents, carers and young people who are trying to resolve a bullying situation with their school. This will ensure that issues are resolved quickly and effectively and that breakdown of the home-school relationship is avoided.

10.9 **In situations where a parent or carer deems their child to be at risk of significant harm from peers in school, for example, if they have been physically or sexually assaulted, or chronic bullying has led to suicidal thoughts, there should be a requirement that a multi-agency meeting is held to formulate a risk assessment and safety plan.** This should involve the family and representatives from the school and Children’s Services as a minimum, and include the Police and health services as appropriate. The plan should be child-centred and trauma-informed.

We welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence or clarification of points raised in this submission.

For any queries on this submission please contact:
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References

ⁱ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

ⁱⁱ [New research shows 1 in 5 children are frequently bullied, as millions prepare for Anti-Bullying Week](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings - Women and Equalities Committee](#)

^{iv} [Everyone's Invited](#)

^v [The Trauma of Bullying | Thoughts and feelings about bullying](#)

^{vi} [Consequences of Bullying in Schools - Ken Rigby, 2003](#)

^{vii} [Is peer victimization associated with academic achievement? A meta-analytic review.](#)

^{viii} [Long-term effects of bullying | Archives of Disease in Childhood](#)

^{ix} [Who is affected by violence? | Youth Endowment Fund](#)

^x [The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel - Annual Report 2023 to 2024](#)

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- xi [The Impact of Bullying on Parents | Thoughts and feelings about bullying](#)
- xii [Elective home education, Autumn term 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)
- xiii [Microsoft Word - P3010 Red Balloon WEIGHTED.doc](#)
- xiv [CVV24 R1 OverallViolence.pdf](#)
- xv [Preventing bullying - GOV.UK](#)
- xvi [Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK](#)
- xvii [Working together to improve school attendance \(applies from 19 August 2024\)](#)
- xviii [Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance: guidance for schools - GOV.UK](#)
- xix [ABA POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS 2.pdf](#)