

# 10 tips to tackle disablist language based bullying in school:

## A guide for staff



The use of verbal abuse as a form of bullying of disabled children and young people is widespread. This has a significant negative impact on self-esteem and achievement. To challenge it requires a consistent wholeschool approach involving staff, pupils, parents and carers. All members of the school community need to be equipped **to always challenge and explain why such language is unacceptable.**

Disablism is a relatively new word and teachers will be more familiar with the need to challenge 'sexism, racism and homophobia'. The Oxford Dictionary defines disablism as '*discrimination or prejudice against people who are disabled*'.

Words such as 'retard', 'spastic', 'mong', 'cripple', 'lame', 'mental', 'nutter', 'idiot', 'moron' 'drrr.. brain', 'dumb', 'four eyes', 'cloth ears', 'flid', 'gimp', 'stupid', 'thick' are linked to impairment. Even when used without any intent to cause hurt they create an environment where disabled pupils, staff, parents and carers are more likely to feel intimidated and at risk of harm.

Schools should create a positive ethos towards disabled people, and demonstrate the negative impact of disablist language on their lives. Successful prevention strategies include:

- Understanding where disablist language comes from
- Why it should be avoided
- The damaging impact that language based disablist bullying has on the self esteem, mental health and achievement of young disabled people.



This has to be owned by children and young people so they understand that name-calling and derogatory jokes are all part of 'othering' and diminishing the essential humanness of the disabled person.

## Top 10 Tips

- 1. Ensure all staff and pupils understand that disablement is socially created.** We, as disabled people, have impairments. This can cause us pain and may shorten our lives, but for most disabled people that is just the way we are. It is the barriers we encounter that disable us. Negative attitudes and prejudice lead to restrictions in the environment and the way organisations, such as schools, function. These barriers can be changed. We cannot. This is called the 'social model of disability'.
- 2. All disabled people are entitled to internationally recognised Human Rights.** These are in the Equality Act (2010) with a requirement that all harassment towards disabled people and other social groups is eliminated. **Schools must develop zero tolerance for disablist language.** All staff must be equipped to challenge any pejorative language and other forms of bullying, by explaining the impact of such language. All such occurrences, however seemingly minor, should be recorded and followed up.



- 3. Hold regular year group or whole school assemblies with disabled speakers** and draw on work from pupils examining the consequences of the use of disablist language, bullying and hate crime. Demonstrate how these are all part of a negative escalating process of 'othering'. Develop both a sense of injustice and an empathetic response.
- 4. Recruit and train young people (including disabled young people) as peer mentors or anti-bullying ambassadors.**
- 5. Set up working groups** in each subject department or primary school to develop effective ways to introduce disability equality into the programmes of study of each subject and year. Monitor the frequency and effectiveness of these disability equality themed lessons.
- 6. Challenge conformity and notions of 'normality' by celebrating the difference in all of us.** Use the corridors, notice boards, classroom walls and books to reflect the inclusion of disabled people.
- 7. Ensure all children and students are educated about the history of disablist language** Link this work with an understanding of the history of disabled people's oppression and what specific attitudes and behaviour it can lead to. Include what is acceptable and what is offensive language about disabled people.
- 8. Regularly challenge wrong thinking and stereotypes about disabled people.** Use newspapers, magazines, films, TV, jokes, literature and social media. Look at Eugenics as an example of false science. Include work in factual English (newspaper coverage, writing and discussion on position of disabled people), Literature (classic texts and examples of positive presence), Maths (statistics and geometry of access), Art (disabled artists and visual portrayal), Drama (analyse stereotypes in drama/films), History (attitudes and treatment at different times), Geography (analyse mapped distributions and environmental barriers), D&T (universal design), Modern and Classical languages (words and meanings, customs), PE and Sport (adaptations and disabled sports) and ICT (cyber bullying and access).
- 9. Recognise the multiple discrimination/prejudice that a young disabled person may face. We know that young disabled people are at significant risk of sexual bullying and need to understand more about how they are impacted by racist, homophobic and transphobic bullying**  
Make sure your school discusses these issues and provide circles of friends and support.
- 10. The whole school, including all staff and governors need to agree to challenge disablist language in schools.** Develop a non-bullying ethos throughout the school. In the short-term ensure the use of disablist language, name calling and jokes that demean are routinely reported and dealt with.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>A much more detailed analysis, responses, suggestions and resources for activities can be found in the ABA/World of Inclusion publication: **Tackling disablist language based bullying in school: A Teachers Guide.**