

John Fardon, who works as a Link Teacher for Northamptonshire's Support, Teaching and Educational Psychology Service (STEPS), explains how the use of Protective Behaviours can help young people in schools develop friendships, keep themselves safe and build self-esteem and self-confidence

Group-work and Protective Behaviours: supporting pupils in a Northants Secondary School

'We all have the right to feel safe all of the time.'

'There is nothing so awful that we can't talk about it with someone.'

These two themes provide the basis for Protective Behaviours, a preventative and empowering process which enables anyone to identify and deal with situations in which they feel unsafe. It is a process which is increasingly being developed across the country by schools, health agencies, social services, police forces and the voluntary sector.

Protective Behaviours began in the 1970s in Wisconsin in the United State. Its roots are in child abuse prevention, which explains the origin of its name. Protective Behaviours spread from the USA to Australia, reaching the UK in the early 1990s. Along the way, it has gradually broadened in its application so that it is now used, for example, in situations of domestic violence, in crime reduction work with young offenders and in safety awareness in schools.

From my own experience as a teacher, I can say that the application of Protective Behaviours is also valid for the more extreme cases of child protection and for the education of young people (and those who work with them) in areas of feelings, rights and responsibilities, risk-taking and in enabling young people and adults to develop strategies for adopting a more confident and empowered lifestyle.

Theoretical framework

In essence, Protective Behaviours is an internal process which allows each person to use its ideas and apply them to their own unique experience. In theoretical terms, it fits in with Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, Social Learning and other theoretical frameworks. Protective Behaviours training examines the 'unwritten rules of society'; thoughts, feelings and behaviour; the two central Protective Behaviours themes set out at the beginning of this article; early warning signs; and the 'seven strategies' which are used to implement the core ideas behind Protective Behaviours.

All these combine to provide a framework which enables people to help themselves feel safe. Where Protective Behaviours differs from other theoretical frameworks is that it is based on 'internal' rather than 'external' measurements, making it available to all people irrespective of intellectual ability, culture or belief system.

For example, we all have our own personal indicators or 'early warning signs' - the physical bodily reactions - which tell us when we are not feeling safe. These will often include butterflies in the stomach or sweaty hands. Understanding and recognising these early warning signs is a vital part of our 'internal' measurement of safety. No-one from outside can tell us *when* we feel safe; only *we* know.

By definition, the 'unwritten rules of society' are not written down, but they do often influence the way we think, feel and behave in different situations. Examples of such rules could be that men should not show their feelings or that children should always obey adults. Misinterpreting those rules, or breaking them, can lead to a range of uncomfortable feelings. Being aware of unwritten rules, therefore, can help guide us to behave in a way that enables us, and others, to feel safe.

Within such a short article, it is not possible to give a comprehensive explanation of Protective Behaviours and its theoretical framework, nor to examine in detail the 'seven strategies' which can be used to implement its core ideas (more details are available from Protective Behaviours UK at the address at the end of this article).

But in this article, I will focus on group work carried out during 1998 at Sponne School in Towcester, one of the schools which I visit regularly, in an attempt to illustrate how Protective Behaviours can work in practice and to illustrate the sorts of benefits it offers to pupils and to schools as broader communities.

Protective Behaviours at Sponne School

Protective Behaviours was introduced to Sponne School in the mid 1990s by Angela

Jones, a school nurse from the local Schools Health Service. By the time I was appointed Link Teacher for STEPS in 1996, therefore, the school was receptive to the idea of further development.

Protective Behaviours is now used at several levels within the school: on a one to one basis with individual pupils at risk; with small groups; with whole classes; with whole year groups; with staff at the school; and within the curriculum.

Part of my role is to support schools in meeting the needs of children identified through the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and to demonstrate preventative methods of working with children who have a learning difficulty, emotional and behavioural difficulty, or both.

The whole school approach

As all good practitioners know, any behaviour policy is more likely to be effective if it is developed by the whole school, with involvement from pupils, staff and parents. The same is true for the effectiveness of Protective Behaviours.

To meet the needs of pupils with challenging or anxious behaviour, it helps if everyone in the school understands and uses Protective Behaviours so that staff and pupils recognise that we *all* have the right to feel safe all the time, and that we also have a responsibility to ensure that others feel safe with us. This is quite a challenge for a school of about 1300 pupils.

At Sponne, the approach has been to start with Year 7 pupils (11 year-olds) and form tutors, to incorporate some Protective Behaviours content into the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum and to train the tutors to use Protective Behaviours. The teaching of Protective Behaviours themes and strategies is taken from *Feeling Safe, Standing Strong: Adolescent Manual for Secondary Schools* (available from PBUK - see address below), and is taught by the form tutors for three PSHE sessions prior to a PSHE day.

The PSHE day has been designated every year to explore the use of Protective Behaviours in a variety of contexts. The first day, in 1997, involved 8 visitors to the school who had all previously undergone Protective Behaviours training, including international Protective Behaviours trainer Di Margetts, STEPS teachers, and a member of the police force. This ensured that at least one person fully trained in Protective Behaviours was in each class to provide support and guidance.

The following year, Sponne teachers arranged the day with STEPS, focusing on bullying, working through drama, painting, drawing posters and designing a leaflet to help new pupils starting in the next academic year. Last year, the day was completely organised by the school and the training of Year 7 tutors was carried out by two teachers from Sponne, who are now trained in Protective Behaviours.

Support has also been given to more vulnerable pupils and their teachers as they move up through the school, on a one to one basis, in small groups or with whole classes. In this way, over the past four years an increasing percentage of staff and pupils have become able to use Protective Behaviours for themselves. This has been documented in a full evaluation of over 200 Year 7 pupils in 1998.

Group-work at Sponne

Yvonne Farrell, a Special Needs Teacher at Sponne, and I also began to plan for a group of Year 7 pupils who we felt needed some extra support during their first year at secondary school in 1997/98. We had both completed the Midland Course in group-work with Children and Adolescents in Northampton.

We gathered evidence from form tutors, from observations made by Learning Support Assistants and from the main reception desk where some pupils often arrived feeling ill or upset in the middle of the day. From an initial list of 14 young people who we approached and asked if they would like to join the group (which was proposed as a pilot project to develop the PSHE curriculum), 8 were selected.

Five of those eight children were already identified on the SEN Code of Practice. Some of the 14 pupils originally identified did not want to attend the group and another pupil was felt to need individual work rather than group work, because of that pupil's more extreme behaviour.

After the pupils and their tutors had completed a questionnaire, we established six specific objectives for the group:

- to develop strategies for dealing with bullying;

- to understand the concept of safety and when we are not feeling safe;
- to be able to identify and name a wide range of feelings;
- to develop a personal network;
- to build self-confidence and develop friendship skills;
- to develop problem-solving techniques.

We ran the group from March until July, at fortnightly intervals, to coincide with the class PSHE sessions. During the middle of that period, the whole year group also experienced a PSHE Day based on Protective Behaviours. We would have preferred meetings to have been weekly, but senior management at the school did not want further curriculum time to be lost.

Parental permission was sought and given, and the pupils themselves were keen to attend. In practice, attendance was excellent with no pupil missing more than one session, and four attending all the sessions.

Structure of the sessions

Each session had a definite structure. We always began with one or two warm-up activities or games, before moving on to some teaching of the Protective Behaviours themes, work on feelings and Protective Behaviours strategies, followed by time for open conversation. We concluded with another game or activity. The children loved the games, which gave us the chance to laugh and move out of our seats, and asked for more each time.

One of the most entertaining and enlightening sessions was when the group looked at possible strategies for keeping ourselves feeling safe, even if we had to wash an elephant. By using an example which was 'one-step removed', the young people were encouraged to think laterally in a problem-solving situation.

After this, they were more able to look at possible anti-bullying strategies. It was interesting to see how the group began to gel and mould together over the months, and to see them take on board the Protective Behaviours strategies and share their experiences.

It is not possible to detail all the strategies in this article, but one of the most powerful sessions came after we had been together on three occasions and the children had taken part in the PSHE day. In open conversation, there was a very honest expression of feelings from several pupils, covering the topics of death, loss of friendship and what we can do when we feel sad.

The session helped me realise the importance of group-work and allowing young people to express themselves in an

environment which they consider safe. When one group member became quite upset talking about a particular bereavement, others supported her and felt able to share some of their own feelings about the death of a pet or a parent leaving the family home.

The session also reinforced an earlier one in which we had worked through labelling feelings - in other words, that it is OK to feel, that we all have feelings in common, and that we can choose how we behave in response to feelings. As facilitators, we felt humbled to be part of the group and felt safe enough to take the risk of allowing this to happen. Our group-work training and Protective Behaviours training certainly gave us the skills to handle such situations.

Evaluation

Evaluation consisted of questionnaires completed by the pupils and teachers, and a session at the end when the group members completed sentence stems and gave us verbal feedback. The majority wanted the group to continue, so a casual arrangement was made for them to meet monthly the following term during lunchtime.

Some of the key points which emerged from the sessions were that strategies to deal with bullying were both discussed *and* used; networks were being used; the group helped with relationships - for example, one girl described how she told some girls how she felt when they bullied her, which helped to stop the bullying; and there was a general acceptance of each other, without put-downs!

Of the six questionnaires returned by teachers, there were positive comments about five pupils - for example, 'performing better in school', 'appears to be less nervous, more secure', 'able to form better friendships and deals positively with problems', 'more confident and self-assertive'.

Comments from the pupils themselves included, 'I learnt not to be afraid; I learnt to stand up for myself', 'I'm in control because of friends', 'We made new friends; I've come to terms with some problems', 'If the group was an animal, it would be a lion because it's strong.'

As facilitators, we also found it very important to write down our own reflections after each session and, when possible, to debrief with each other. (We had loosely arranged supervision but did not need to make use of it.)

Conclusion

Group-work in itself is valuable for the members of that group. As described here, it provides support to pupils and a forum in

which to talk about issues that concern them. Without training, I would not have been able to carry out this work with any confidence, while co-facilitating the group enabled Yvonne and I to support each other and remind ourselves of what we were trying to do.

Protective Behaviours has a universal application in a wide range of situations and we were able to adopt Protective Behaviours as a framework for the group, clarifying its purpose and providing content to enable pupils to feel stronger and more capable of dealing with difficult issues.

If Protective Behaviours is taken on board and 'internalised' by members of staff, and is practised in the classroom, playground and other areas of the school, then it is possible to have a positive effect on a school ethos or culture. It is also very important that Protective Behaviours is lived out in relationships between pupils and staff; as with any policies in schools, they can either be filed away in the office or lived out in real life.

I believe Protective Behaviours is one way in which we can enhance the lives of staff and pupils in schools, and that it can be extended to include parental involvement too. If we want to reduce school exclusions, it is crucial to create an environment in which we all recognise the right to feel safe and exercise the responsibility to observe the rights of others to feel safe too.

And if at the same time, we can also learn to develop a network of people with whom we can talk, then I am optimistic for the future of our young people.

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Information regarding PB Training is available from PBUK, c/o Joc Rose, Health Improvement Team, Shipley Court, Marsh End Road, Newport Pagnell, Milton Keynes, MK16 8EA (Tel: 01908 217121 - ask for Protective Behaviours)

Information regarding the Midland Course in group-work with Children and Adolescents is available from Naina Sadrani Tel: 01604 604608 or email Kedar@dial.pipex.com

Learning to make the most of website links



First of all, many thanks to readers who have contacted me with comments and suggestions. Claudia Alfieri from the Mental Health Programme at the Health Education Authority informs me that there is an updated website for World Mental Health Day at www.hea.org.uk/campaigns/mental_health/. There is also an interactive site for young people at www.uzone.org.uk, including a problem solving maze with real prizes!

No doubt many of you will be only too familiar with the experience of surfing the Web, looking for information on a particular topic, when you come across what at first sight appears to be a page full of very promising links - only to discover that many of them cannot be found, have moved or are simply useless. This can be a great waste of precious time and a source of enormous frustration. The links to be found on the Young Minds website (www.youngminds.org.uk) are not like that (well, almost). I suggest you copy some of them into your "favourites" folder for future reference. This month, I will focus on two of the sites listed there under "Internet Gateways".

First, try looking at "Taggish - Directory of Information Sources in the UK" - www.tagish.ltd.uk/tagish/links/default.htm#health. This is a really excellent resource through which you can find the websites of UK Universities, Health Care Providers, National and Local Government bodies (many available alphabetically or via an interactive map display!). It also has a list of good search engines.

The "Social Work Gateway" at www.soton.ac.uk/~chst/webconn.htm has a large and very general set of links designed for teachers, students and practitioners of social work. The list contains over 350 web addresses under 34 headings. These would take hours to investigate and I will report back on more of them in a later column.

One which immediately drew my attention, however, was "The Site" at www.thesite.org.uk/pix/home/ts06.jpg, run by a small British charity, YouthNet UK. It is designed for young people and has extensive information on a range of subjects including drugs, education and work, money, housing, sex and health, action and sport. And it's all presented in a teenager-friendly style!

Another of the entries in the Social Work Gateway list led me to the final, and possibly the most important site for this column. Everyone now appreciates how useful the Internet can be, but equally, most of us know how infuriating it often is in use. There is also more and more concern being expressed about the authenticity of websites and the reliability of the information they contain. Under the European Union's Telematics for Research Programme, however, the EU has funded the development of a resource called "The Internet Detective" which can be found at www.netskills.ac.uk/TonicNG/content/detective/0.html.

This is a two hour interactive tutorial on the use of the Internet, with particular emphasis on helping users to approach their searches as efficiently as possible and to assess for themselves the quality of the material they access. For example, there is a section on decoding the rather arcane web addresses or "URLs" so that the user can obtain more information on the origin of the site. The tutorial uses worked examples and online tests so that users can monitor their progress. I really would recommend this site as an example of how the Internet can be employed to improve its own worth.

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