

Suggestions that may help if you are being bullied – written by a retired headteacher

- ▶ There is a great deal of helpful information on the web. This list is just a starting point.
- ▶ Do realise that you are not alone, surveys show many teachers are being bullied.
- ▶ Talk to people you trust about what is happening. If you use social media be very careful what you say and who you say it to.
- ▶ Talk to friends and family – often a good way to ‘let off steam’, they may be able to help you sort out what is happening, why and which situations make it worse. It is useful to get some perspective.
- ▶ I found that almost all teachers I have spoken to have some story to tell, either about themselves or others. Years later those bullied still felt cross about what had happened, but they had survived and could talk about it and what they had found helpful. One person’s story follows this list.
- ▶ Write everything down, keep a ‘diary’ with dates, times, what was said and who was there. This has many uses. In disciplinary actions, employment tribunals, discussions with your union - but mainly it can allow some perspective on the situation. Keep all e-mails and any relevant texts.
- ▶ If you are able to confront the bully then decide how to do this, but chances are you are not able to do this and feel helpless - because this is how bullies survive.
- ▶ Consult your union. Join a union if you are not yet a member.
- ▶ If your union member is on the staff and you feel unable to trust them or they are also being bullied, or may even be the bully, then contact your union and go to the area representative and ask their advice.
- ▶ Find out all you can. Are others getting the same treatment? Has this happened before? What do you know about the bully?
- ▶ Make some decisions. Do you want to do something about it, or are you just going to ‘hang in there’ and let it carry on, or find another job?
- ▶ If you're a stressed-out teacher dealing with being bullied at school try calling the *Teacher Support Line*.
- ▶ Join a support group, for example, one web site is at <http://www.bulliedteachers.org.uk>
- ▶ Read of similar cases on the web; see if they contain suggestions that may be helpful to you. www.bullyonline.org is useful.
- ▶ There are some excellent books on being bullied out there. Find them on the web. Always useful to find out what other people did.
- ▶ What is a practical joke to one person can be harassment to another. Under the Protection from Harassment Act (1996), it is the perception of the person being harassed that is taken into account, not the alleged intent of the harasser. The old excuses such as "It's only a joke" or "Can't you take a joke?" no longer hold water and show the harasser taking no responsibility for their actions.
- ▶ Find out all you can regarding responsibilities towards your welfare, for example, school governors and headteachers do have a ‘duty of care’. If you explain what is happening they should investigate and help to deal with the situation.
- ▶ Study all relevant school documentation such as disciplinary policies. Make sure you have all the necessary information.

- ▶ Make sure you know your particular terms and conditions of service. The procedures, processes, composition of governor bodies, etc are defined in law. A case against an employee is usually only made on disciplinary or competence grounds. Bullying is a disciplinary matter.
- ▶ Stress can lead to illness, if it has got to this stage then speak to your doctor about time off. A teacher cannot be dismissed on ill-health grounds until a medical hearing has taken place. To dismiss without this hearing is a breach of contract. Any decisions and actions which do not conform to the statutory rules and regulations may be deemed ultra vires (beyond legal authority), i.e. flawed and therefore nullified by a court.
- ▶ This is only a brief look at dealing with bullying. Bullying is insidious and often difficult to deal with. Look for support and help.

Bullying in the Workplace – a Teacher’s Story

A new head teacher was appointed – the staff were surprised as he had not impressed them at all during the two-day interview whenever they saw him around the school, but he had impressed the interviewing panel.

As the weeks passed, the staff behaved professionally towards him. I was ready to admit that we might have been wrong about him, as he seemed to be passionate about education; I was not then on the senior management team so was not privy to discussions in that arena – which were not easy, I subsequently learned. As time went on, however, relations between him and the rest of the staff deteriorated – mostly through lack of respect – in both directions. It wasn’t helped by the fact that two Inset days were attended by his wife – a teacher at another school – who jointly presented a number of items with him, and kept referring to ‘our school’.

Towards the end of his first year at the school, I witnessed an appalling incident in which he verbally assaulted an autistic boy in the hall at the end of an assembly – this was in front of the entire school. As a result of this and other incidents, both I and the deputy head discussed resigning; she did – I didn’t.

Instead, I wrote a letter to the governors, complaining about his behaviour and mentioning this incident in particular. He was outraged and for the next four or five months, school was a very unpleasant place. He ordered me off the premises one morning, demanding I hand over my keys, as he considered I was there much earlier than I needed to be! Fortunately a colleague and very good friend heard from her room; she joined us and asked if he would like her keys as well – he declined and walked away.

He then took steps to have me dismissed through incompetency and we had regular meetings before school involving HR, meetings that were minuted by the school clerk – a parent whose children I taught. Up until the meetings began I had not been a member of a teaching union. I was advised to do so and joined the NUT. My representative was fabulous – very calm and very soon she realised what a complete ***** he was. She did most of the talking on my behalf and was extremely perceptive in her comments, whilst remaining scrupulously polite.

It became obvious that there were no grounds for my dismissal, but it took a long time in which he threw accusations at me (with no evidence). Eventually the meetings stopped when he realised I was not going anywhere.

Some months later a letter of dissatisfaction with his leadership was presented to the governors, signed by all of the staff; he wrongly accused me of being the author of the letter. As a result, the head of a successful neighbour school was invited in by the local authority to 'assist' this beleaguered head who was 'having to deal with a very difficult staff'. Within two days the local head had summed up the situation – in his opinion the fault was not with the staff. Some days later our head was escorted from the school premises for misconduct on another matter entirely. We never saw him again.

My advice – join a teaching union to protect you – not from the children or parents, but from potential bullying from senior staff. But I was helped also by the fact that another, much more intelligent and reasonable head, was able to step in and see the problem. How many heads are there left like this?