

HEADLINERS

A young perspective

The changing relationships between teachers and pupils have affected the way schools deal with bad behaviour and bullying - but young people argue that needn't be a bad thing.

Changes in the pupil-teacher relationship: A Belfast View

The current generation of school pupils have always had legislation in place, which prohibits corporal punishment. And so it is difficult for most of them to understand that some teachers may experience disempowerment and feel poorly equipped by removing the cane from the classroom.

But pupils had clear views on how teachers could use discipline and still get the best from their students.

Most teachers, however irritated they may feel about a pupil's behaviour, recognise the sanity of the 1987 legislation, which protects children's human rights in the classroom. A dwindling minority may still favour, the clip around the ear, the thwack on the head or rap across the knuckles approach, though they may have gathered a little more support when cases, such as head teacher Marjorie Evans hit the headlines at start of this year.

A primary school teacher with 35 years of experience was accused of slapping a pupil. She insisted throughout her yearlong suspension that she had not slapped the pupil but had restrained him when he tried to push, punch and head-butt her.

A high court judge eventually quashed her conviction for allegedly slapping a ten-year-old pupil. That was after the court heard a videoed police interview, in which the boy talked about a plan to get rid of Evans from the school.

Despite the favourable legal outcome for the teacher involved, there can be no doubt that this case sent tremors through the teaching profession.

In a recent article entitled Brats Are Having It All Their Own Way published in the Belfast Telegraph, the author suggests that "we are breeding a generation of unruly brats who know they can get away with more or less anything." She continued "for in today's warped society, the child's word is always sacrosanct."

It cannot be denied there are malicious children, just as there are malicious adults, who misuse their position of power. But caning or slapping is not the way to get children to behave, learn or respond in the long term. In fact, if physical violence is resorted to then the teacher is doomed to suffer disempowerment - at least in the eyes of today's school generation.

Living in the age of information technology, Ali G and the World Wide Web means that most pupils are more sophisticated and more aware of their rights than 20 years ago.

The notion of accountability and openness is a familiar concept to most teachers and pupils. The school children know off pat the action to take if they feel under threat from peers or teachers.

Procedures have been set in place to protect young people as a result of decades of silent suffering at the hands of extreme disciplinarians and abusers.

This school generation are in the know.

It is also widely accepted children are reaching maturity at a much earlier age. And society as a whole has evolved. Adults do not tend to automatically accept the views of those seen to be in positions of power, such as doctors and teachers.

Young people are more inclined to question and challenge adult authority. They want to make comment about issues that affect them. They know what works for them and do not want to revert back to the old ways - children should be seen and not heard.

Even within the school system, many young people operate best on a quid pro quo basis. Respect they feel is not automatically given but has to be earned.

Holly, (15), who attends secondary school, rejects corporal punishment as a way of discipline in school. "It is wrong to hit kids, you could shout at them, give them detention or something but you shouldn't hit them."

She believes that most pupils do respect their teachers but warns, "if the teacher is cheeky to them they'll be cheeky back."

Primary school student Conor (10) added, "As we grow up we become more unruly and less like sheep."

Schoolgirl Alice (13) said, "some pupils do mess about because they know they can't get hit but they'd be the sort of childish ones trying to be cool. But if teachers make them realise that they are not being cool but that they are just being childish and stuff it might sort them out."

Certainly the laws of nature play a part in the emotional roller coaster ride of puberty. For many handling these new emotions can be difficult.

Seventeen-year-old schoolboy Ryan said hitting puberty coincides with young people making a bid for independence. "As young people grow and start developing into adults they are going to continually push the teacher and try to get independence and teachers try in a sense, to take this independence away," he said.

"There are always going to be some pupils that don't respect authority and will stand up to authoritarian figures," he added, but felt that the problem was one to be sorted out at home rather than in the classroom.

"Sometimes young people push to the absolute limits, sometimes maybe it is to get a thrill to see what the teacher is going to do or just for the hell of it but basically, it depends on the child's background."

"The child is continually going to push if they are aware that the parents will do nothing," Ryan said.

Ryan suggested that those students who continually seem to land themselves in trouble need counselling not more punishment. Parents and schools have to work in partnership when a child's behaviour becomes an issue, he said.

But not every pupil is interested in testing boundaries or getting into wrangles at school.

"You have people who like to get on with their work and get on with their life and then there's people who just want to mess around," said Michael (14), who attends a secondary school for boys.

Matt (12), who had heard of the case involving the primary school teacher believes that poor behaviour is linked to self-esteem.

Having just recently moved from primary to secondary school he found "some are just sensible. But then you get others that just want to be popular and the class will love them for being cheeky to the teacher - but most won't do that."

A thick ear in response to a young pupil's misbehaviour is something that might still be discussed by their grandparents as appropriate practice but really it is about as relevant to today's school pack as writing on slates.

According to some of the young people interviewed for this article physical reprimand is sometimes used in the classroom setting, although duster lobbing, key throwing or a little arm grabbing was not considered threatening behaviour more than the "teacher had lost their cool."

But Janine (15), who attends a girls school said, "some-one you are afraid of you don't like to ask for help. The relationship between pupil and teacher could probably improve. If you had a teacher you liked you would work better for them."

Her friend Aoife (15) agreed. "In second year, I got into a bit of trouble. I danced on tables, I was hyper then."

"I was going to be put down into first year but a teacher helped me and talked to me. She got me into my proper class and I've always respected her since because she really helped me out."

Aoife added that even a few years on when she needs help with course-work she goes to that particular teacher because "she'll always help me no matter what."

For lower sixth year student Drew (17) it all boils down to mutual respect.

"Teachers that are very calm and that talk things through are the best kinds. I believe they get more respect because you can relate to them and be on more of an equal footing with them," he said.

The message being clearly written on the school blackboard by young people is they want an ounce of respect and their views to be heard.

Dealing with bullying

Bullying increases at start of school

Contact Youth is a youth counselling service, which provides one-to-one counselling, pastoral care within schools and also operates a free telephone help-line.

Alison Kinnear, counselling co-ordinator for the organisation said telephone calls about bullying increase sharply at the start of the school term. We've got to recognise that the bullies need help as well because their behaviour is being anti-social.

"I've been seeing a few clients who have come to us because of bullying. Over the summer months they wouldn't be in contact mostly because they go on holiday. Come September even within the first week we'd start getting phone calls and clients back again."

"Sometimes they (the bullies) don't actually understand the effects it has on other people. Sometimes they're unhappy themselves, maybe they've been bullied themselves," Kinnear said.

Training for school teachers

Acting Principal Vivienne Boyle said Belfast Model School for Girls has a bullying policy in place and pupils know that they can talk to the pastoral team if they are concerned about anything.

"We know it exists, it exists in every school but we recognise that," she said.

"On the induction afternoon when addressing parents, we would have made it very clear that if there was any bullying, if they know that their child is being bullied that they should let us know so as we can deal with it sooner rather than later," she added.

Girls' Model invites experts to provide training for school staff on how to deal with victims and perpetrators of bullying.

"We've got to recognise that the bullies need help as well because their behaviour is being anti-social, it is totally unacceptable and there's a reason for that," Boyle added.

"Bullying exists throughout society and I think as a school we reflect society and what we do in schools has to prepare young people to live and cope with all aspects of life and work as far as we possibly can," she said.

When it comes to bullying, she believes "girls maybe a bit more underhand. Boys are more likely to be up front and physical."

Bullying - just part of growing up?

Mairead Monds, Programmes Co-ordinator with Save The Children in Belfast agreed the reasons young people bully are complex and numerous, however she was critical of the approaches taken by some schools towards the problem.

"Sometimes schools just say it's part of growing up - that's life. And the bullies get a message from schools that it's ok to bully," she said.

Guidelines have been produced by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, which schools can use to develop anti-bullying policies but there is no

statutory duty on schools here to produce such policies unlike the situation in England and Wales.

"We're working with the Department of Education to try and bring the same law into Northern Ireland that they have in England and Wales and that law makes it a legal obligation. That means schools legally must do things to try and prevent bullying and also to deal with it properly," Monds said.

About the team

This story was produced by editors Mairead Duffy and Margeruite McNeil, 16, Drew Mikhael, 18, Michael Leathem, 15 and Thomas Kielty, 16. It was published in International Children's Rights Monitor, a [Defence for Children International](#) publication.

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