

Bullying - What do we know so far?

**A summary of the literature, research,
legislation and policy which has informed
anti-bullying practice in Scotland**

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Service**



Introduction

Bullying has been an issue of social concern for many years. It became an area of focus in the early 1970's when research began to focus on bullying and violence in schools. Bullying and the effectiveness of anti-bullying programmes have been the subject of academic attention since then and there is a growing body of knowledge on the nature of bullying, the complex issues it presents and the impact it has on the lives of those involved. Considerable research has since been undertaken in Norway and other Scandinavian countries, the United States, Australia, Europe and the UK on the development of anti-bullying interventions and their effectiveness.

Much of the initial research and literature was led by Dan Olweus from Norway whose work primarily focussed on the individual characteristics of 'bullies' and 'victims'. Olweus informed and developed government sponsored training programmes to address bullying in schools in Norway, which influenced similar programmes in America and beyond. This work continued throughout the 1980's and has contributed to a deeper understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding bullying behaviour and the dynamic nature of this social problem.

In the 1990's the recognition of children's rights informed anti-bullying approaches as the extent to which bullying affected children and young people's performance in education was evidenced. This led to more comprehensive strategies to promote more positive learning cultures for all children through the development of a "Whole School Approach". Such approaches have been implemented within education provision in many countries, although there are considerable variations in their detail and in the range of resources required to support effective interventions. There is also a developing awareness of bullying beyond the school gate and the need to extend programmes and public education to achieve a degree of social change which is supportive, respectful, responsible and enabling of all children and young people's development.

From the mid 1990's in Scotland the government has been active, both in legislation and in policy development, to ensure that the education system supports individual pupils' learning needs within mainstream settings. All schools are required to be health promoting in a bid to promote children and young people's physical, mental, emotional health and well being. Anti-bullying awareness, policy development and training strategies have also been developed within Scotland through the Scottish government's investment in *respectme*, and the development of the Scottish Anti-Bullying Steering Group.

This literature review has confined itself to three main areas: clarifying the nature and extent of bullying behaviour; the complexities which have to be embraced in efforts to reduce bullying behaviour; and the research available on the effectiveness of these interventions. This review does not elaborate on the short or long-term impact of bullying behaviour on children and young people, as this is well documented elsewhere.

Definitions, terminology and prevalence

The early pioneering work by Dan Olweus in Norway in the early 1970's identified male aggression as a major feature of bullying and examined the individual psychology and temperament of boys who bullied. This early work oversimplified children and young people's experiences of bullying and in particular overlooked other, perhaps more subtle, forms of intimidation and exclusion, including bullying by girls. Awareness and agreement of what constitutes bullying behaviour critically informs any statistics gathered on prevalence rates and patterns of reported incidents. Reliable data on the extent of bullying in schools in the UK is hard to obtain as there is no way of confidently defining, recording or reporting experiences. Some indicative information is highlighted by the following evidence:

- P.K. Smith et al reported in 1999 that between 10% and 20% of pupils in English schools had been bullied in the preceding six months.
- A study of youth crime for the Home Office identified that about a third of 12 to 16 year olds surveyed reported they had been bullied in the previous year (Flood and Page et al., 2000)
- Bullying in Britain: Testimonials from Teenagers, identified that more than half of the 7,000 young people who participated said they had been bullied. One quarter of these young people described bullying as the main source of stress in their lives, and one in ten described the extent of bullying as severe (Katz A., 2001).
- In Scotland, data collected through a survey undertaken by Health Behaviour in School – aged Children (HBSC., 2002) identified that one in twelve pupils (8.4%) reported that they had been bullied. The level of reported incidents dropped with age, with 10% of 11 year-olds stating they had been bullied compared to 5.6% of 15 year-olds. They reported no significant differences in the frequency by which boys or girls were bullied. HBSC undertook cross-national comparisons of the Scottish data with other countries in Europe and North America, and they ranked Scotland at the lower end of the reported incidents of bullying, 28th out of 35 comparison countries, with lower reported incidents of bullying than England, the USA, Norway and the Netherlands. They also plotted reported incidents of bullying over the preceding eight years which indicated that there was evidence of a reduction in reported incidents of bullying in Scotland between 1994 and 2002. However, there is no room for complacency within this research, as they identified that Scotland has significantly more reports of fighting between pupils than is reported in many other countries. Scotland was ranked 10th out of 35 other countries in incidence of fighting between pupils in schools and higher than all the previously named countries in this area.
- While these statistics reported above pertain to the whole school population, bullying is known to disproportionately affect vulnerable children and young people and incidence rates are likely to be greater in these groups. To illustrate this, NCH undertook a survey of young people they were working with in 2003 to ask their views about issues that affected them at school. Bullying was identified by 24% of these young people as their

biggest concern. The issues that they wanted to see improved to help them at school were to do with the curriculum, relationships with teachers, and having someone at school to support them with personal problems. Only a few identified that they were seeking support on dealing with bullying itself.

Disclosure of bullying

There is an assumption on many adults' part that making them aware of bullying incidents is beneficial, even essential, for children and young people to receive the support, protection and intervention they may need. However, this perception does not appear to be shared by children and young people themselves. There are some indications that as they grow older young people fear that alerting adults to bullying will make the situation worse, resulting in fewer disclosures and more young people preferring to solve problems on their own.

This is confirmed by Whitney and Smith (1993), who identified that half of bullying incidents hadn't been reported to anyone. Research by McLeod and Morris (1996) indicated that children contacting ChildLine's Bullying Helpline did try to alert adults to their plight: 82% of child callers reporting they had told a parent or someone at school that they were being bullied, and 60% had told more than one person. A concerning finding from this study was that children reported ineffective responses and poor outcomes when they alerted adults:

- 57% of children who told their parents experienced no change in their experience of being bullied.
- 72% of children, where the parent had spoken to the school, experienced a continuation or worsening of the problem.
- 28% of children who told their schools fared worse.

These children explained that some adults refused to accept the seriousness of the problem, some took pre-emptory action on behalf of the child while others suggested the child sort it out for themselves. The evidence is that majority of the children who phoned ChildLine found that telling responsible adults had been ineffective in stopping the bullying.

This experience is not confined to the UK. A Dutch study reported by Fekkes M. et al in 2005 indicated that almost half of children and young people who were being bullied did not tell their teacher and that when children did tell, the bullying did not stop or it became worse.

Mishna and Alagia detailed some of the complex dilemmas faced by children who are bullied and identified the following reasons for not telling someone:

“powerlessness, victim self-blaming, secrecy, retaliation, child vulnerabilities, fear of losing the relationship with the bully, and poor expectations of adult effectiveness”.

(Mishna and Alagia., 2005)

The nature of bullying and incidence of bullying

Definitions of bullying abound, and most commonly include terms of aggression, intentional harm, recurring over time and characterised by an imbalance of power. Children, however, extend these definitions to include more subtle rejections such as name calling, teasing, being ignored or excluded from a group as equally distressing. Some children experience bullying that is unintentional, arbitrary and may define a single event as bullying. Most definitions of bullying presume it is a child on child experience, however, 4% of children calling ChildLine reported they were being bullied by an adult, 18% of whom named a teacher (McLeod and Morris). The common thread for children is that bullying is characterised by feelings of powerlessness, fear and anxiety and a distinctive feature is the perception of the spiralling fear of events being outwith the child's control.

A report for the Scottish Government, "Bullying Looking to the Future", by the TASC Agency (2004) identified some of the most serious factors contributing to bullying in Scotland as: racism, poverty, homophobia, gender stereotyping and religious bigotry. This report also highlighted the dilemmas and complexities involved in reaching an agreed definition of bullying which makes it difficult to accurately report and record bullying incidents with any consistency.

The number of children who contacted ChildLine in Scotland between 2005 to 2008 seeking advice and counselling regarding all types of abuse, rose by 50% (ChildLine, 2009). These figures may reflect easier access to mobile phones and greater confidence in seeking help than a rise in abusive incidents. Similarly the pattern identified by McLeod and Morris that more girls reported bullying to ChildLine than boys, may reflect more that girls are more comfortable in using a telephone helpline than boys. McLeod and Morris report the majority of children being bullied, 56%, are being bullied by a child their own age, though 34% of children reported being bullied by older children. They indicate that girls mostly reported being bullied by girls and similarly most boys reported by other boys. McLeod and Morris identified that the peak age for both boys and girls to call ChildLine was between 12 and 13 years-old. The last years of primary school and the first years of secondary school were identified by the Health Behaviour in Scotland study (HBSC) who reported a steady increase in bullying by boys from primary 7 through to year 4 in secondary school, with its peak in year 2 of secondary schools. This pattern of bullying behaviour prevalent during the transitional years between primary and secondary school was also evidenced in Norway (Olweus., 1991).

The Scottish Government, in its response to the UNHCR consultation on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2008, quote that 28% of children calling ChildLine report bullying incidents. The Health Behaviour in School age Children report indicated bullying by boys, 6.6%, was almost twice that of reported bullying by girls, 3.7%(HBSC., 2002).

The focus of Olweus research on bullying tried to identify specific characteristics of people who bully. He described in 1993 'bullies' as impulsive, dominant, aggressive individuals who had

physical strength and who demonstrated little empathy towards their 'victims'. He identified that 'bullies' had tendencies towards anti-social behaviour and rule breaking. He also postulated the 'bullies' gain some sense of satisfaction from inflicting pain on others and that they usually sought to obtain some benefit from their 'victim', by way of money or goods. He similarly identified 'victims' as cautious, sensitive, anxious children with low self-esteem, without friends and, in boys, physically weaker than their peers. Some of this approach has been subsequently challenged, as it presumed such characteristics were causal and the research did not establish the prevalence of these characteristics within the whole population of children, many of whom do not become 'bullies' or 'victims'. Furthermore Rodkin et al, found that highly aggressive boys may be among the most popular and socially connected students when rated by both class mates and teachers (Rodkin P. et al, 2000).

The tendency for adults to try to identify rational reasons for bullying behaviour is evident in research, though the nature and reasons for bullying can be both inexplicable and barely visible to those who are not being bullied. Differences between children due to race, religion, weight, hair colour, height, sexual orientation, capabilities, etc may be more obvious to adults and they may view these as a motive for bullying. However, the reasons for bullying are not always obvious, and by its nature bullying can be secretive and difficult to spot. Even when some physical features are observed, their implications are not always predictable, as illustrated by children affected by obesity. Griffiths et al studies in Bristol found that preadolescent obese boys and girls were more likely to experience bullying because they don't fit the perceived norm. However, older obese boys are more likely to bully others because of their physical dominance in the peer group (Griffiths L.J, 2005).

The research approach of Olweus on the individual pathology of bullying was not easily compatible with some other emerging frameworks for understanding and intervening in social problems. Child development literature from the 1970's challenged the morality of labelling children and cautioned that approaches which blamed the child reinforced negative stereotypes. There was a growing body of work from psychologists which focused on changing children's behaviour rather than blaming them. In Scotland the development of the Children's Hearings system focused on children's needs, not whether they presented challenging behaviour or were in need of care and protection. The focus of intervention and support did not differentiate between children who were bullied, or those who bullied others, and compulsory intervention is to promote the development and education of the child through supervision and support services. This artificial dichotomy between bully and victim is also illustrated in the McLeod and Morris research of callers to their Helpline in 1996 which identified that 15% of primary children and 12% of secondary children said they had both bullied and been bullied in the last year. This confirms that some children can demonstrate bullying behaviour and experience bullying behaviour. Case material also indicates that some children who have been bullied can go on to demonstrate bullying behaviour, as they have learned the effectiveness of bullying.

A broader awareness of the need to understand bullying behaviour in its social context has contributed to the development of interventions across the school environment. In 1997 Olweus

published *The Whole School Approach to Bullying*, which focused attention on the role of the teacher, their influence over classroom practice, professional socialisation, classroom characteristics, school climate and collegial communication. Olweus acknowledged the need to restructure the social environment of the school in order to reduce vandalism, theft and other anti-social behaviour (1997).

In recent years the emergence of new technology and increased access to mobile phones and the internet have created new medium for bullying behaviour, called Cyberbullying. This term has alerted adults to online or 'virtual' bullying and new programmes have had to be developed to help children protect themselves when using new technology. This illustrates the dynamic nature of bullying as a continually changing social phenomenon that may emerge in different societies in different ways, over time. It has also highlighted how the nature of bullying is influenced by social, economic and environmental factors surrounding the child.

The Whole School Approach

Dan Olweus pioneered the development of comprehensive, multi-level interventions at pupil and classroom level and across the school to prevent bullying. Such programmes were designed to move beyond the focus on the individual as a 'bully' or 'victim' and to recognise that the ethos of the school needs to change (1993). As the Olweus programme developed he identified four key principles:

- Creating a warm, positive school environment with interested and involved adults
- Declaring firm limits on unacceptable behaviour
- Consistently applying non-punitive, non-physical sanctions on unacceptable behaviour and violation of rules
- Positive role modelling by all adults involved with children.

Olweus identified the need for interventions at all levels within a school: measures targeting the entire school population; measures at a classroom level to build a safe environment for learning; and measures at an individual level, to address issues in relation to 'bullies' and 'victims'.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program has undergone large scale evaluations pre and post implementation, which has reported positive results in bullying in schools, including the following:

- Substantial reductions in bullying behaviour in schools of between 32%-49% in 'bully'/'victim' problems
- Significant reductions in student reports of anti- social behaviour, vandalism, theft, drunkenness and truancy
- Significant improvements in the social climate in the classroom, with a more positive attitude to learning and discipline
- Improvements in student satisfaction with school life (Olweus,1997)

This Olweus Program was influential and has become widely known as the Whole School Approach, an approach which has informed many subsequent anti-bullying initiatives.

There has been some questioning of the degree of success reported by Olweus attributable to this program, some within Norway, Roland 1993 and in other countries, Smith et al in England in 2000 and Rigby. In 2002 Rigby undertook a meta-analysis of research into 12 different intervention programmes across a range of countries in Europe, Canada and Australia. He found that, in general, these programmes produced modest reductions in the proportion of children being bullied by peers and found that benefits were evident in kindergartens and primary schools to a greater extent than in secondary schools. More positive results were evident where programmes had been thoroughly implemented. Rigby questioned the underlying theoretical perspectives that informed some programmes and suggested there was no single explanation for the causes of bullying. As such there should be a range of effective strategies for both preventing and intervening when bullying occurs and that these should be delivered within a whole school approach, supported by clear anti-bullying policies (Rigby K., 2003). There is no doubt however that the more comprehensive approaches involving the whole school, pioneered by the Olweus Program influenced and informed subsequent developments in the UK, Europe and in the United States.

The Dutch government supported a national campaign on school safety between 1995 and 2000 which aimed to reduce bullying and violence. Mooji undertook research to evaluate the outcomes of this and found that the national campaign appeared to have helped improve the awareness of pupils' social behaviour and in particular elicited a reduction in violent behaviour. However, he identified that more specific pedagogical and preventative support for pupils socially at risk were needed (Mooij T., 2005).

An approach in the United States, The Peaceful Schools Project, was designed to address the culture within schools and to reduce the level of violence evident in some inner city schools. These schools recognised that they needed a programme to reduce bullying, as the ethos of the school could enable or impede the development of children and young people's potential. Research into this well established programme was undertaken by a child psychiatrist, Twemlow et al in 2005, who confirmed that children who are at risk will have serious problems if their school environment is unfriendly, unhelpful, competitive or demanding. They confirmed that prejudice and stigma in such schools can marginalise vulnerable children and can result in bullying behaviour. They indicated there was a need for more therapeutic work with these children and suggested that parental support programmes, working alongside a multi-professional approach of the Peaceful Schools Project, would further improve the social world of the school for children at risk.

The McLeod and Morris (1996) study highlighted the importance in schools investing in the development of a range of strategies to counteract bullying and violence in schools. They recommended that schools should include the following within their approaches to bullying:

- Code of conduct for adults and children
- Behaviour principles
- Anti-bullying statement
- Advice for children who are being bullied
- Expectations of parents' involvement in school
- Behaviour contract between child, school and parent.

Children and young people consulted by McLeod and Morris in the ChildLine study were clear on the elements that work for them and that they would wish to have included within schools' anti-bullying programmes. Children wanted much more detailed responses and programmes which help increase their skills, and wanted to be confident that adults would effectively help them deal with people who bully, such as:

- Structured opportunities for raising and discussing bullying, especially through drama and English lessons
- Positive response when they raise concerns about bullying
- Being included in handling the bullying incidents
- Having a culture of decency
- Skills to help when they witness bullying
- Parental involvement when punishing people who bully
- Playground supervision.

McLeod and Morris concluded that such a range was not evident in many schools in the UK:

“Because the pattern(of bullying in schools) is complex there is no quick and easy solution schools can apply to stop or reduce bullying behaviour; rather they need to put in place a wide ranging approach , flexible enough to respond the variety of bullying incidents encountered. This study shows schools little evidence of schools having the rich range of responses required” (McLeod and Morris, 1996).

An area of particular concern and risk for children results from the consequences of alerting and involving adults in responding to bullying incidents. Mishna and Alaggia, highlighted that disclosure may escalate bullying activity and further victimise children (2005). As a consequence they identified Practice Principles for working with 'victimised' children and state that while some of their principles are similar to that promoted by a whole school approach, the need for sensitivity to each child's situation and their attention to the dilemmas for the child in reporting bullying are worthy of consideration within every school environment:

- Foster an environment which addresses the seriousness and range of peer victimisation
- Recognise possible signs of peer victimisation
- Provide a relationship that helps children disclose without pressure
- Anticipate and minimise the increased stress on the 'victim' resulting from disclosure
- Listen, understand and validate the child's experience
- Consider legal reporting obligations, ethical issues and limits of confidentiality

- Address the multiple and complex factors that result from disclosure
- Support the peers of children who may be bullied to help them respond to disclosure.

This work highlights that the nature of response of the adults in schools to children's disclosure and their confidence to handle this matter sensitively continues to be a critical aspect of the effectiveness of the service children receive.

From the early 1990's the Scottish government supported the development of a diverse range of initiatives in education to promote discipline and prevent bullying in schools. This encouraged the development of Circle Time, Buddies, Peer Mentors and Circles of Friends, programmes not perceived as discipline or anti-bullying initiatives, but which have been incorporated into the life of many schools in order to make them healthier, happier and more supportive learning environments for all children and young people. One key message that emerged from an analysis of different initiatives in 16 schools across Scotland was the importance of embedding these strategies securely within the culture and fabric of the school and the education system (Promoting Positive Discipline, Munn P., 1999). This finding confirms the earlier finding from the ChildLine study which comments on the importance of congruence in the experience of staff relationships and the messages given to children:

"It is unlikely that a culture of 'decency' can prevail if the head teacher's behaviour and that of his or her staff, does not model what they expect of the children" (McLeod and Morris., 1996).

This was reiterated in the conclusion of a large scale review of a number of anti-bullying programmes:

"It has become clear that the effects of an intervention are to a great extent dependent on the quality and fidelity of programme implementation" (Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004)

There is need for more research to understand how such initiatives have contributed to culture change in schools and which of these more holistic approaches have made an impact on bullying within schools.

The legislation, policy and practice in Scotland

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) outlined a number of Articles which enshrine children's right to a holistic education, based on respect for their individual needs and free from discrimination, prejudice and punishment. The Scottish government has embraced a children's rights approach in a range of policy initiatives developed since this time and subsequent legislation has enshrined these principles in law. The Scottish Government promoted a more strategic approach to anti-bullying as evidenced in a discussion paper by the Anti- Bullying Network in 2003 which highlighted the obligations of local authorities and schools in relation to bullying (University of Edinburgh,2003) The devolved Scottish Parliament established the office of the Children's Commissioner in 2004 to promote the rights of children

and to monitor progress, policy and legislation in all areas relating to the lives of children and young people. Bullying was identified by children to the Commissioner from an early stage and this informed a public information and awareness raising initiative, called FRESH, which was aimed at parents and young people to encourage them to be *Fair, Respectful, Engaged, Safe and Honest* in their interactions. In 2007 the Scottish government developed their strategy further, through funding the development of *respectme* to work with all adults who have a role in children's lives, from parents to policy makers, to understand their responsibilities in supporting children who have been bullied, to raise awareness of the impact of bullying and to promote pro-social behaviour.

Much of the legislation relating to children in the last 15 years has been informed by a rights-based approach, clarifying parental responsibilities, promoting children's rights and seeking to develop more inclusive, responsible communities. The significant legislation relating to children is summarised below:

- The Children (Scotland) Act (1995) clarifies the rights and responsibilities of parents in relation to their children and the duties and powers of local authorities to support families.
- Additional Support for Learning Act (2004) supports the education of all children and young people within mainstream education. This required authorities to reduce barriers to learning, including disability, language and other forms of discrimination, which can include bullying.
- Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 promotes the further involvement of parents in their children's education and in the development plans for schools.

At a UK level :

- The Equality Act (2006) promotes all aspects of discrimination by the amalgamation of previous separate commissions on disability, sex and race and extended aspects of equality monitoring to age, religion and beliefs.

In addition, there has been considerable activity in the last five years in all aspects of government policy in Scotland to promote equality and a rights-based approach within the fabric of the health, education and social care systems. Alongside this there has been action to develop more integrated responses between services and to promote early intervention in work with children. All schools have been urged to ensure that anti-bullying strategies are embedded within positive initiatives in which children's rights are respected, where their needs are addressed individually and where their school, family and community promote children's health, well being and development.

The key policy drivers are summarised below:

- Curriculum for Excellence – A range of initiatives to transform the education system to provide a more coherent, integrated, flexible curriculum for children and to give children

and young people the skills needed to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

- Education for Citizenship - A programme to foster children and young people's thoughtful and responsible participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country.
- Getting it Right for Every Child - A range of programmes aimed at improving the outcomes for all children and young people by building solutions with children and their families when they need it, by the most appropriate professional, in a coordinated way. The aim is for all children to be: Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected and responsible and Included.
- Early Years and Early Intervention – A joint Scottish Government and COSLA policy to reduce inequalities, to target sustained and effective interventions on those children and young people most at risk, and to build the capacity of families and communities to improve outcomes for children.
- Health Promoting Schools- There has been a range of policy developed with the aim of reducing inequalities in health and improving the overall health of the population in Scotland. This included specific initiatives to improve children's physical, mental health and well being: Mental Health of Children and Young People, Healthy Futures, Better Health Better Care, Equally Well- Ministerial Task Force. Within all of the above there is recognition that schools provide an effective context to promote health and to develop children's resilience and relationships. As a result, since 2007 all schools are required to be Health Promoting Schools.
- We Can and Must Do Better – There have been several initiatives targeted to improve the poor outcomes of children who are looked after and to raise awareness of the responsibilities of local authorities as corporate parents for these children and young people.
- Integrated Children's Service Planning - Each Local Authority is required to prepare and publish an integrated plan for its children's services, involving all the key service providers, both statutory and voluntary, in consultation with parents and children.

In 2009 the initiatives listed above have been reinforced within 15 National Outcomes agreed between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to be delivered over the next ten years. These are key components of the strategic objective for Scotland to become;

Wealthier and fairer, Greener, Healthier, Safer and stronger, and Smarter.

The National Outcomes have been derived to provide a clear structure for focusing attention and performance of Scottish Government, local authorities and all other agencies invested in Scotland to focus on these objectives. Of the 15 objectives there are several key objectives which focus on children and families:

- Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. (National Outcome 3)
- Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed (National Outcome 5)
- We have improved the life chances of children young people and families at risk (National Outcome 8)

Other National Outcomes focus on improving the health of everyone and increasing employment, while others aim to build stronger, safer, inclusive communities where inequalities are tackled and where public services are more responsive to people’s needs. The links between existing policies in education, health and social work that underpin these National Outcomes is illustrated in the following diagram.

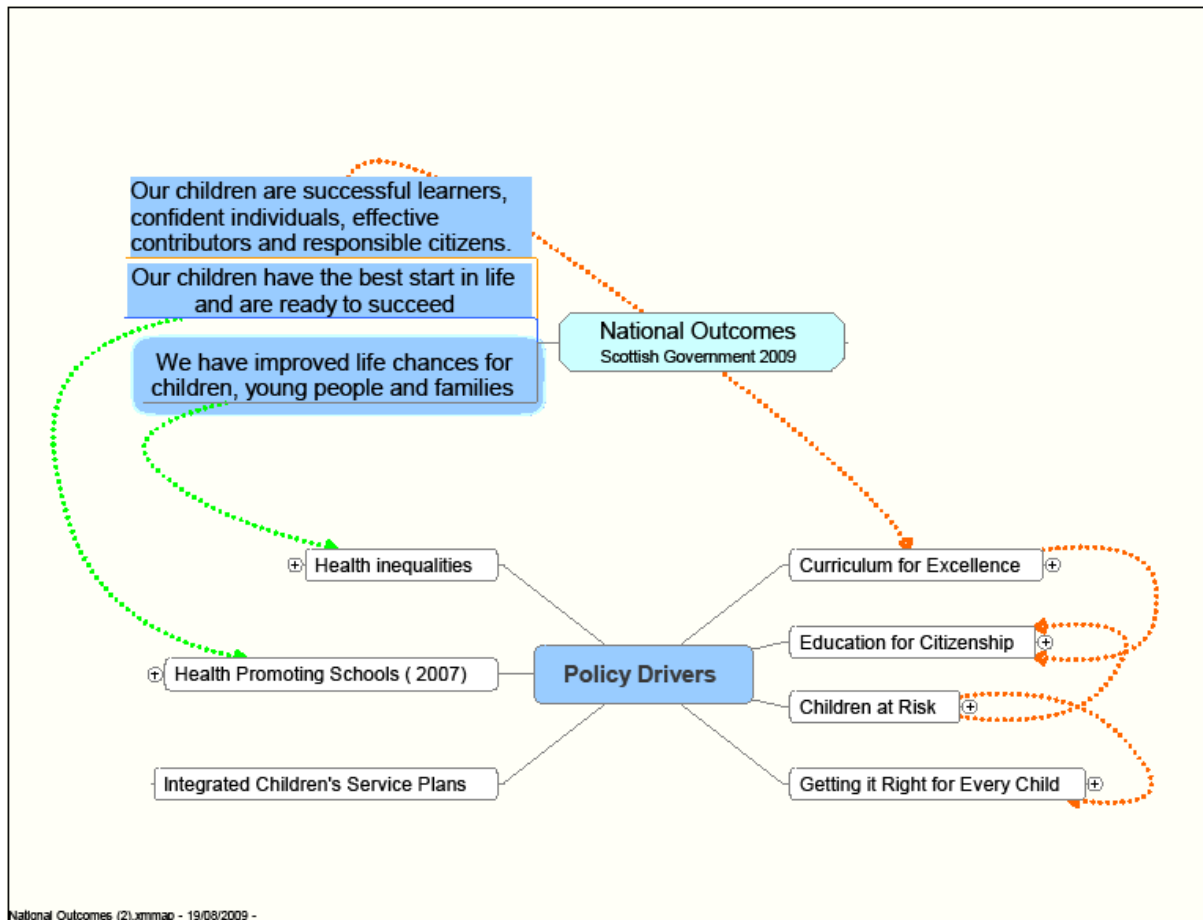


Chart – Links between National Outcomes and key policies for children’s services

Measuring performance on these National Outcomes will be the focus of much of the monitoring and evaluation required of education, health and social work services in the next ten years.

The success of anti-bullying strategies in Scotland in future could be linked to their relevance and contribution to achieving these National Outcomes. It will be important to establish which of the policies and approaches are most effective in creating a culture in which bullying is reduced and in which all children, especially those most vulnerable, are enabled to develop to their full potential.

Mary McKenna, August 2009

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