

All Together: Preventing and Responding to Sectarian Bullying Behaviour Among Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

A Guide for the Children's Workforce – 2025



FOREWORD

Sectarianism has shaped the landscape of Northern Ireland for too long, leaving scars not only on our political institutions but also on our everyday interactions, relationships and, critically, the experiences of children and young people. While great strides have been made towards peace over the past 30 years, this report reminds us that the legacy of division is not confined to the past, and that sectarian bullying behaviour persists online, in schools and in public spaces across our towns and cities.

This Guide and Online Training Course for the Children's Workforce (i.e. professionals that work with children and young people), based on our timely piece of research, shines a spotlight on a problem that is too often overlooked or trivialised as normal and acceptable behaviour. Drawing on the voices of children and young people themselves, it provides a compelling and at times deeply uncomfortable account of how sectarian attitudes and behaviours continue to blight their lives. It also reveals how such bullying behaviour is experienced, responded to and, in some cases, ignored.

This research matters. It matters because in our post-conflict society every child deserves to grow up free from fear, hostility and exclusion. It matters because understanding the nature, incidence and root causes of sectarian bullying behaviour is essential to building safe, inclusive, rights-respecting schools that form integral parts of a safe, inclusive, rights-respecting society. And it matters because if we are serious about peace, we must be prepared to face up to and address some of the uncomfortable truths that still shape all of our lives.

What is perhaps most powerful about this report is that, although it also draws on the perspectives of parents/carers and teachers, it shines a particular spotlight on the perspectives of young people themselves. In doing so, it challenges us as educators, policymakers, parents, and community leaders, to listen more closely, respond more effectively, and work more collaboratively. These findings are a warning against complacency and demand not only acknowledgement but action to educate, inform and upskill.

This is not an easy read. Nor should it be. But it is a vital one, and a timely reminder that the work of peacebuilding must include our children and young people, not only as future citizens, but as rights-holders and changemakers in the present.

Professor Noel Purdy OBE
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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-eight years after the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, Northern Ireland continues to build a more peaceful and inclusive society. However, sectarian divisions persist. Sectarian bullying behaviour remains a pressing issue across schools, communities, and online spaces, impacting children's wellbeing and social cohesion.

The All Together project, funded by the Reconciliation Fund of the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs, set out to explore the nature and extent of sectarian bullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The project was delivered by the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA), which is part of the National Children's Bureau. ABA designed and led the research, including the coordination and facilitation of focus groups with young people, and developed both the accompanying guidance and CPD training resources. The work was supported throughout by members of ABA's Northern Ireland Working Group, who contributed valuable input to the development of the guidance materials. A small-scale data collection was undertaken by the Anti-Bullying Alliance between December 2024 and January 2025. This included:

- **Surveys:** Independent polling commissioned by ABA and conducted by Censuswide with representative samples of 100 parents/carers, 100 school staff, and 100 young people.
- **Focus groups:** ABA facilitated six focus groups involving a total of 53 children and young people aged 13 to 17. These were held in secondary schools and youth organisations across interface areas of Belfast, Portadown, and Derry.

The data gathered through this research was analysed by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, led by Professor Noel Purdy. CREU produced the final research report based on this analysis.

The research focused on the perspectives of children and young people, as well as parents, carers, and school staff. It aimed to deepen understanding of sectarian bullying by investigating: the nature and forms it takes; where it occurs, both online and offline; and the extent to which young people report incidents and how they feel these are handled. Despite the persistence of sectarian attitudes among adults, there is a notable gap in evidence about the impact on children and young people—this project begins to address that.

ABA's Northern Ireland Working Group: This group is open to ABA members working in Northern Ireland. It focuses on anti-bullying policy, campaigning (including Anti-Bullying Week and Odd Socks Day), and practice in Northern Ireland. With over 50 members, the group played a key role in shaping the project's outputs. You can find out more about the group [here](#).

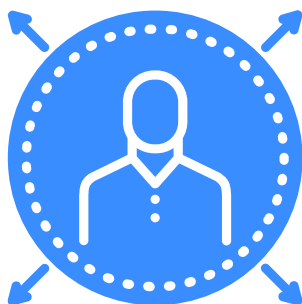
These resources can be found at www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sectarianbullying

Please note that the quotes in this guide are taken directly from our focus groups and surveys. Any incorrect spellings have been preserved to maintain the authenticity of the responses. Additionally, some quotes contain discriminatory or derogatory language; these have been included to accurately reflect participants' views. We encourage readers to take care while engaging with this content, and we appreciate your understanding.



SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH



Sectarian bullying is still widespread, involving verbal abuse, physical violence, and social exclusion based on perceived community identity. It often takes place in schools, public spaces and online.



Young people are desensitised to sectarian abuse, often minimising verbal or online incidents and rarely reporting them unless physical. This normalisation contributes to poor responses and underreporting.



Shared education and open dialogue are widely seen as key to breaking down prejudice and preventing bullying. Young people value opportunities to build understanding across communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

Tackling sectarian bullying behaviour requires a coordinated effort across schools, youth services, communities, and government. The following recommendations aim to prevent incidents, support those affected, and build a culture of respect and inclusion:

- 1 Raise awareness and challenge normalisation**
Public campaigns should highlight the harms of sectarian bullying behaviour and promote understanding, helping to challenge its normalisation in society.
- 2 Educate for change**
Schools should include education on sectarianism into the curriculum, including history, identity, and respect for diversity. This should be supported with a practical toolkit for educators, offering lesson plans, guidance, and resources.
- 3 Invest in staff training**
Teachers and youth workers must receive high-quality initial and ongoing professional development to recognise, prevent and respond to sectarian bullying behaviour. Training should be trauma-informed and build confidence in challenging prejudice.
- 4 Create inclusive environments**
Staff and volunteers must reflect on their own influence and model respectful behaviour.

5

Strengthen reporting and response

Schools, youth services and community groups should ensure there are clear, accessible and trusted systems for reporting sectarian bullying behaviour. Reports must be handled fairly and consistently, with appropriate follow-up and support. Restorative approaches should be considered where appropriate, alongside open conversations with families and collaboration with police and community groups when incidents occur in public.

6

Promote cross-community engagement

Long-term, meaningful cross-community programmes should be expanded to reduce prejudice and build empathy among young people.

7

Involve young people in solutions

Young people should be actively involved in shaping responses and policies to ensure they reflect their lived experiences and priorities.

8

Support families and carers

Parents and carers should be offered workshops and resources to help them recognise and address prejudice at home.

9

Address wider discrimination

In addition to sectarian bullying behaviour, young people have raised concerns about rising racism, anti-immigration bullying behaviour, and broader forms of discrimination. These must also be addressed as part of a comprehensive approach to inclusion.

10

Next steps

Our small-scale research suggests that while significant work has been done over many years to promote community cohesion in Northern Ireland, sectarian bullying behaviour still affects some young people, and further research, training, and support for schools and families could help build on existing progress.



DEFINING SECTARIANISM AND SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

WHAT IS SECTARIANISM?

Sectarianism in Northern Ireland refers to the discrimination, prejudice, or hostility based on perceived religious or political identity, particularly between Protestant and Catholic communities. It manifests in cultural, political, and social divides, influencing education, sports, and public spaces.

WHAT IS SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?

Sectarian bullying behaviour is the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power, and the actions are motivated by discrimination, hostility, or prejudice based on religious or political affiliation, particularly between Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. It can be physical, verbal, or psychological and may occur face-to-face or online.

Sectarian bullying behaviour in Northern Ireland must be understood within the broader context of historical and intergenerational trauma that continues to shape family dynamics and community relations. Research into sectarian bullying behaviour must account for these wider networks of trauma, recognising that harmful behaviours in schools or youth settings often reflect broader societal tensions and do not function in isolation.

ADDRESSING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2016

Under the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, all grant-aided schools are legally required to put in place measures to prevent and address bullying behaviour*, including bullying behaviour motivated by sectarianism. The Act defines bullying as repeated behaviour intended to cause harm, including verbal, written, electronic, or physical acts. Schools must have an addressing/anti-bullying policy, review it at least every four years (or in light of significant incidents or emerging need), consult with the whole school community, and record all incidents, including the motivation, method and outcome. Boards of Governors are responsible for ensuring the policy is effectively implemented. The Act recognises that bullying behaviour may be connected to identity or prejudice-based motivations, including a pupil's community background or political affiliation. The legislation applies to incidents occurring on the premises of the school during the school day, while travelling to or from school, in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff, or while in educational provision on behalf of the school. The Act also gives schools the power to take action to prevent online bullying behaviour.

For more information, visit the Education Authority's guidance: <https://www.eani.org.uk/schools/policies-and-guidance/other-policies-and-procedures/addressing-bullying-in-schools-act-0>

*Please note the guidance advises referring to bullying type behaviour or bullying behaviour



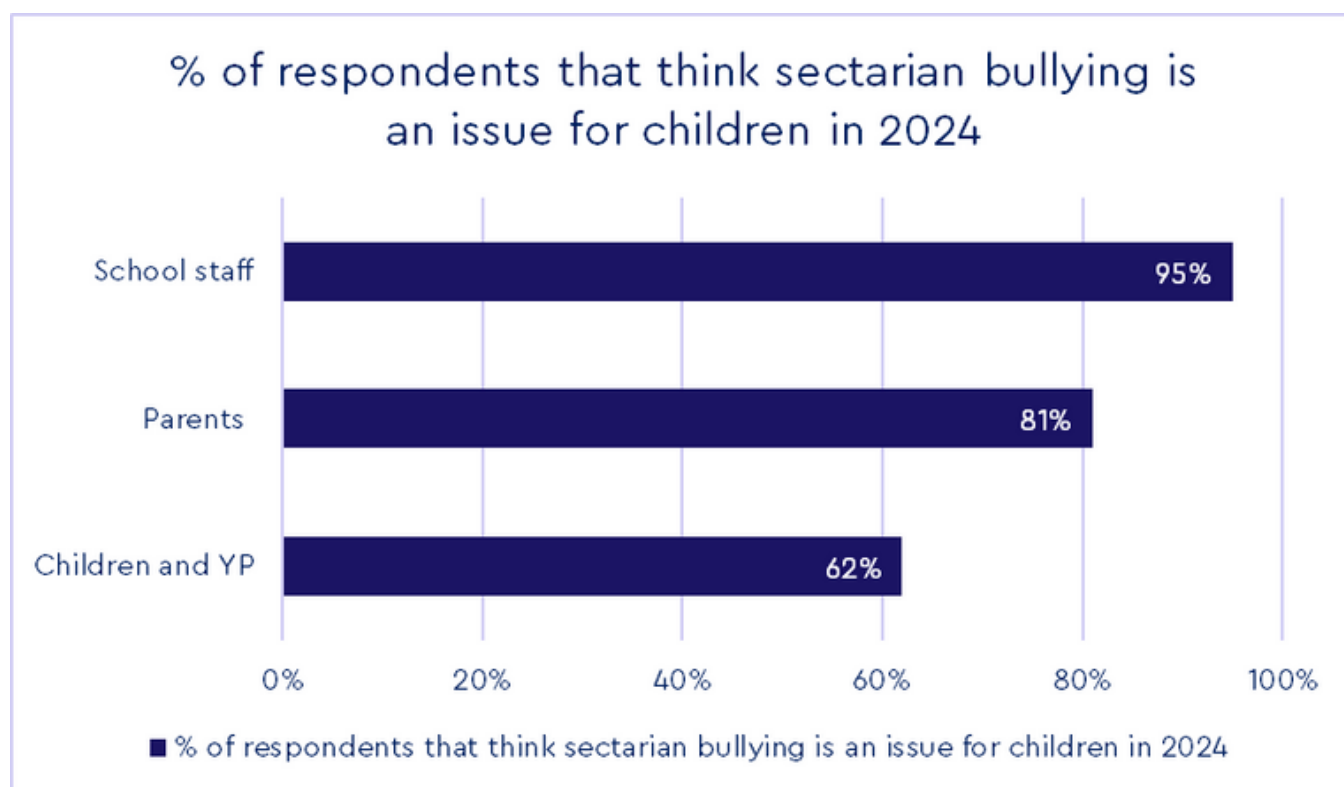
THE PREVALENCE OF SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN 2025

Research has shown that sectarianism and sectarian bullying behaviour are still rife among adults in NI[1], but until we undertook this research, there was very little available research into the impact of sectarian bullying behaviour among young people in Northern Ireland today. Is sectarian bullying behaviour still an issue for children and young people in Northern Ireland? Our research has revealed that sectarian bullying behaviour remains a serious concern in Northern Ireland, affecting young people across different settings. Research from 2024 reveals that 81% of parents and 95% of school staff believe sectarian bullying behaviour is still an issue. While schools and community groups have worked to promote inclusion, our research and consultation has suggested that sectarian tensions continue to influence interactions between young people.

"Northern Ireland will never not be sectarian. Unfortunately children are brought up with bitter parents which has a domino affect on their kids."
– Parent and carer respondent

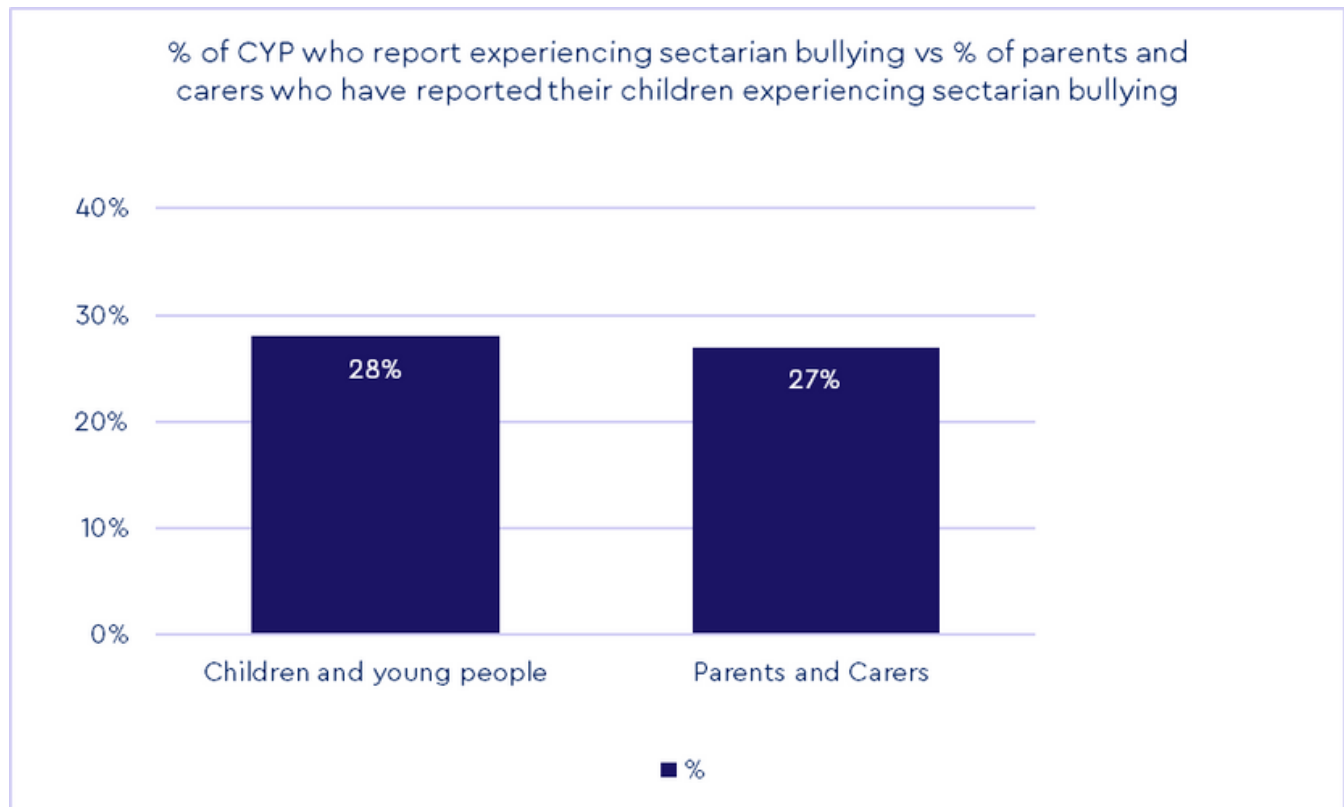
In focus groups, many young people reported experiencing or witnessing sectarian bullying behaviour, with 62% in our survey agreeing it was still a problem in their lives. Despite progress in fostering peace, generational attitudes and territorial divisions remain powerful drivers of sectarian conflict. The persistence of this issue underscores the need for continued education, policy intervention, and practical support for young people.

"It happens in everyday life that no one reports in any way."
– Young person from our focus groups



HOW MANY REPORT EXPERIENCING SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?

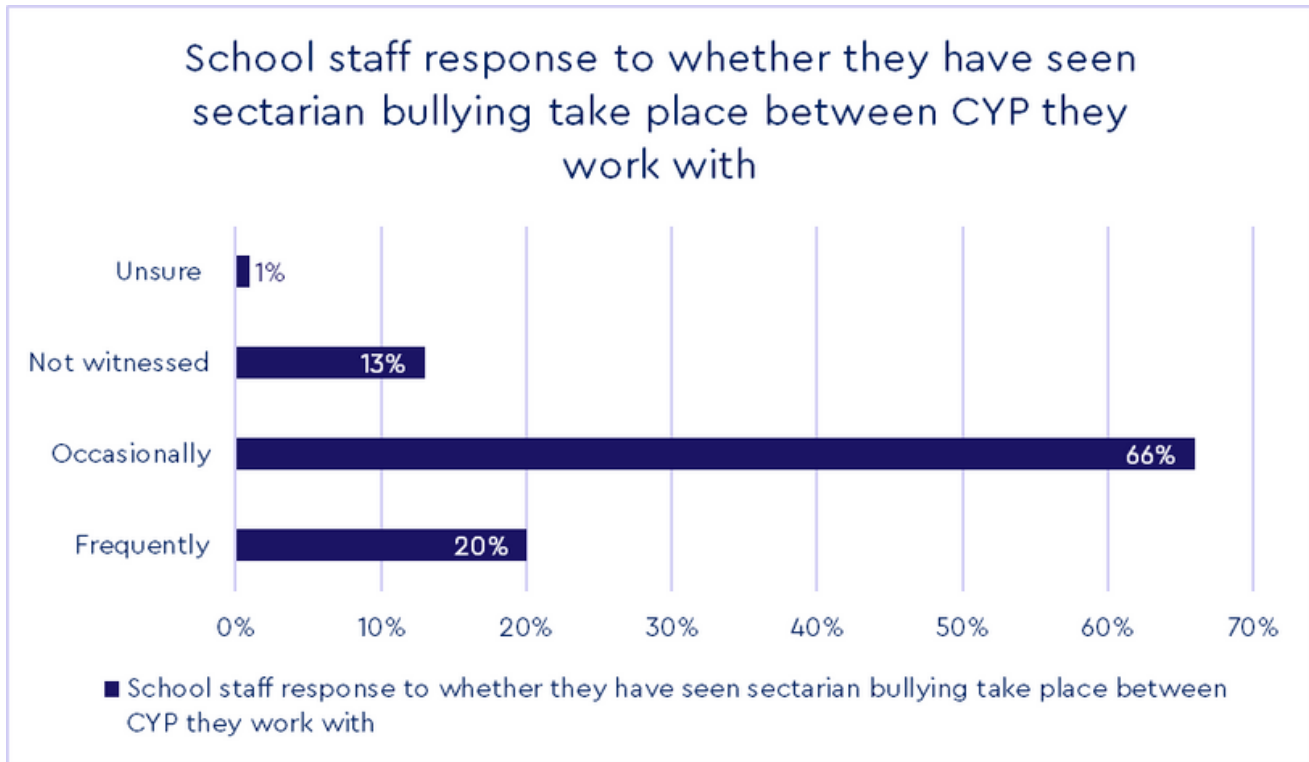
Through our research 28% of children and young people said they have been on the receiving end of sectarian bullying behaviour and a similar percentage of parents (27%) reported their children being on the receiving end of sectarian bullying behaviour.



"Sectarian bullying will always be present here, people live in the past and bring their children up hating like they do" – Parent and carer respondent

DO SCHOOL STAFF SEE SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR TAKING PLACE?

We asked school staff if they have seen sectarian bullying behaviour taking place and a significant percentage had seen it with 86% saying they'd seen it and 20% saying they had frequently seen it.



“Sectarian bullying can take any form ranging from verbal abuse to physical abuse and social exclusion” - School staff respondent

“It's (sectarian bullying) common” - School staff respondent

WHAT TYPES OF SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR ARE TAKING PLACE?

Sectarian bullying behaviour manifests in various forms, reflecting both traditional and modern expressions of sectarian division.

Some of the most common types include:

- **VERBAL ABUSE:** Sectarian slurs, name-calling, and offensive chants remain a frequent form of bullying behaviour. Words like "Hun" and "Fenian" continue to be used as insults, reinforcing division.
- **PHYSICAL BULLYING:** Some young people report being targeted for physical aggression because of their perceived community background.
- **SOCIAL EXCLUSION:** Many children experience being deliberately left out of activities due to their religion or perceived identity.
- **ONLINE HARASSMENT:** Sectarian bullying behaviour has moved beyond physical spaces and is now common on social media, with young people facing threats, abuse, and intimidation online.

"With certain creators on Live, it is widely known if they Protestant or Catholic, there'll be people in the comments being like, oh, you're a taig or a hun, like, something like that there." - Young person from our focus groups

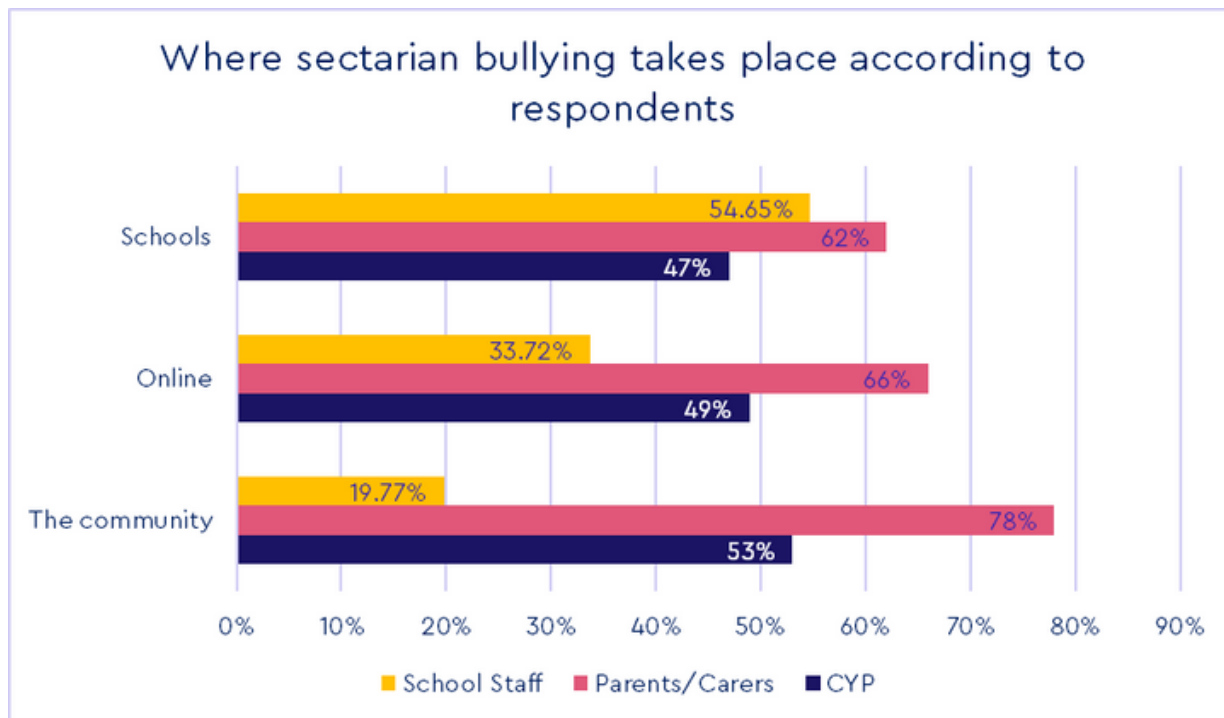
When asked about the form of sectarian bullying behaviour they experienced, 71.43% of children reported verbal bullying behaviour, 35.71% of children reported sectarian slurs, 32.14% experienced peer exclusion, and 25% faced physical attacks.

Young people in focus groups reported that sectarian bullying behaviour often escalates around key cultural events, such as Orange Order parades, St. Patrick's Day, and football matches.



WHERE DOES SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR TAKE PLACE?

Sectarian bullying behaviour occurs in various settings, each presenting unique challenges:



The community:

53% of young people reported that sectarian bullying behaviour takes place in the community. Many young people report experiencing it in their local areas, particularly in divided neighbourhoods where tensions remain high. 78% of parent and carer respondents reported that sectarian bullying behaviour takes place in the community, while only 19.7% of school staff respondents reported that they saw sectarian bullying behaviour in schools.

Online:

Cyberbullying related to sectarianism is increasingly prevalent, with social media platforms becoming spaces where young people engage in or are targeted by sectarian abuse. 49% of young people reported that sectarian bullying behaviour takes place online compared to 66% of parent and carer respondents who believed that it took place online. 33.7% of school staff respondents saw sectarian bullying behaviour taking place online.

Schools:

There is a regional expectation that schools keep a record of methods and motivations for all alleged bullying type behaviour and respond to emerging patterns and trends. This would include a record of all potentially sectarian motivated incidents. While schools strive to be inclusive, sectarian bullying behaviour still takes place. 47% of young people reported that sectarian bullying behaviour takes place in school, compared to 62% of parents who reported that it takes place in school. 54.6% of school staff respondents reported that they saw sectarian bullying behaviour taking place in schools.

Public transport:

School buses and other public transport are reported as common sites of sectarian bullying behaviour, where young people feel vulnerable to intimidation and verbal abuse. There was a lot of agreement about where sectarian bullying behaviour was taking place among young people, parents and school staff with most of it happening in the community closely followed by online and in schools.

“A lot of times when it happens in school it can usually happen in schools where there’s more of a power imbalance. For example, it’ll be more likely for a Protestant to get bullied in a Catholic school than in a mixed school, because there’s more of an imbalance, and vice versa.” - Young person from our focus groups

WHAT CAUSES SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?

Through our research we have identified that sectarian bullying behaviour is driven by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors:

General attitudes:

We heard that young people often inherit sectarian views from parents, grandparents, and community leaders, influencing their attitudes and behaviours.

"Yeah. Because of, like, the older generation, because of, like, what we are taught, like, growing up. Because obviously they lived a lot different than how we live now. So it was constant, like, they had, like, a different perception from the outside of the community than what we did. So they're, like, drawing their thoughts into our heads." – Young person from our focus groups

"It's your community, it's your parents, it's your family. They have their views. And when you've been brought up, you kind of tap into their views and you can tell what people's been raised to hate, to hide and, you know, discriminate the religions of people." – Young person from our focus groups

Community identifiers:

School uniforms, sports team affiliations, and accents can make young people targets for sectarian bullying behaviour.

"Like we get told all the time, be careful going into the town in your uniform, which shouldn't be the way it is at all. But because we are where we are, it unfortunately is. But you know, you know, to look out for it." – Young person from our focus groups

Historical division:

Many communities remain physically and culturally segregated, leading to a lack of interaction between different groups and fostering misunderstanding.

"It would take a lot to stop, like to stop the whole thing. It causes a hate between communities that are Catholic and Protestant, which still goes on to this day from so many years ago. Our local communities still hate each other just because they're picking that up from their parents too. If you don't like that area, then your sons and daughters don't like that area and that's how it has been going on for years." – Young person from our focus groups

"I think it's really hard on, like, celebrations, like, their bonfires, and we celebrate St Patrick's Day because obviously that's a day where you really don't want to see anybody else from a different religion and then you have to kind of avoid certain areas." – Young person from our focus groups

Peer pressure:

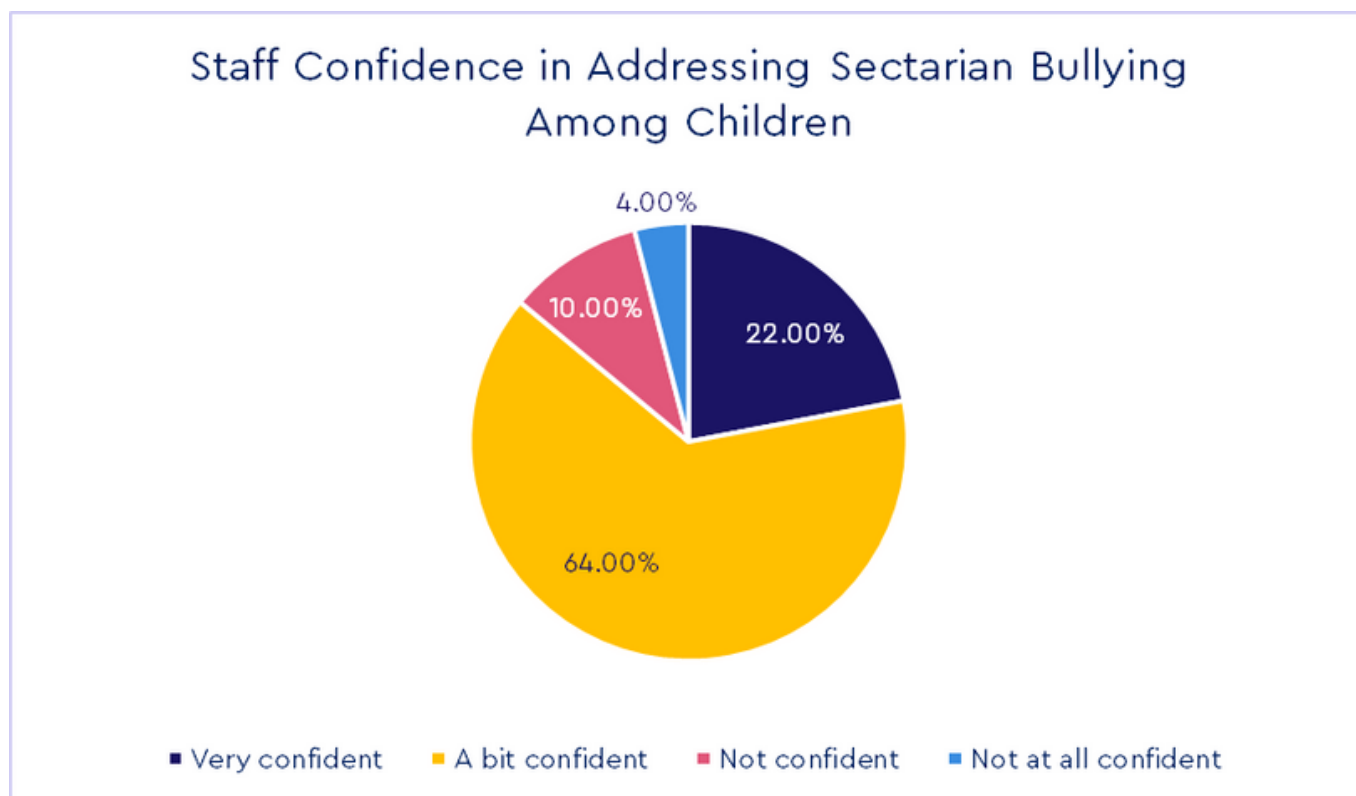
In some cases, young people engage in sectarian bullying behaviour as a way to fit in with their peer groups.

Ingrained attitudes:

Many young people in focus groups expressed that sectarian attitudes are so ingrained that they often do not realise when they are engaging in or witnessing sectarian bullying behaviour.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE SCHOOL STAFF IN TACKLING SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?

While the majority of school staff acknowledge sectarian bullying behaviour as an issue, confidence in addressing it remains low. Only 22% of educators reported feeling "very confident" in tackling sectarian bullying behaviour, with many citing a lack of training and clear guidance.



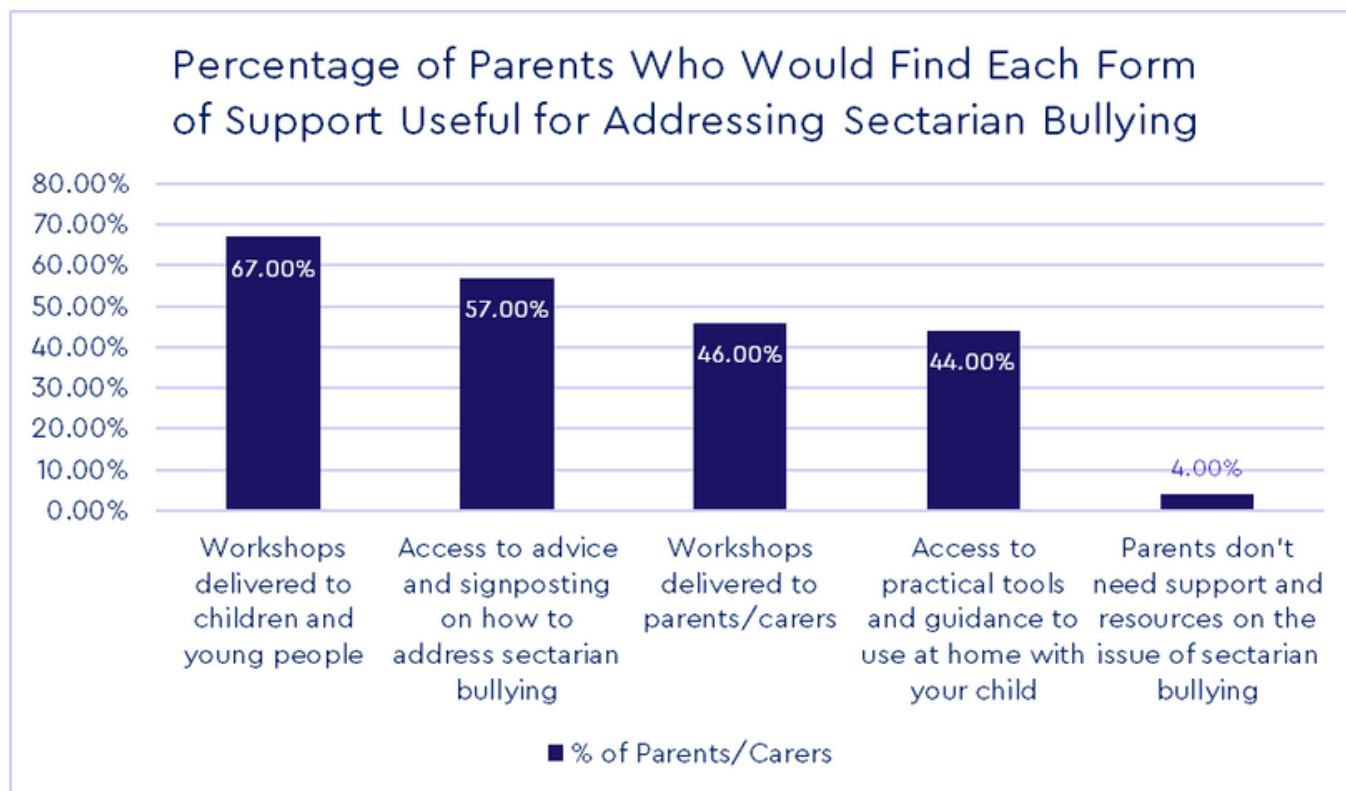
While we did not explore in detail why this is the case, some of the comments received indicated that their key concerns were:

- Fear of making the situation worse by mishandling sensitive issues
- Uncertainty about how to address historical and political sensitivities
- Lack of formal training on sectarian bullying behaviour prevention and intervention
- Challenges in engaging parents, particularly in divided communities

Many educators call for increased support, including professional development opportunities and clearer policies on addressing sectarian bullying behaviour in schools.

"It has happened in my school and even though there is a desire from the staff to tackle it and support these students, it is a huge ongoing challenge." – School staff respondent

WHAT SUPPORT DO PARENTS AND CARERS SAY THEY NEED ABOUT SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?



Parents and carers play a crucial role in addressing sectarian bullying behaviour, yet many feel unequipped to handle these issues effectively. Based on our survey responses, the majority of parents and carers believe that support and resources would benefit them in addressing sectarian bullying behaviour. 67% of parents and carers reported that workshops delivered to children and young people would benefit them on the issue of sectarian bullying behaviour. 57% believed that access to advice and signposting on addressing sectarian bullying behaviour would be beneficial, and 46% felt that workshops for parents and carers would help. 44% reported that they would benefit from access to practical tools and guidance to use at home. Only 4% reported that they do not need any support of resources on the issue.

"Proper education needed and more intervention or cross community education" - Parent and carer respondent

"More should be done to have cross community activities in the towns." - Parent and carer respondent

DO YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR?

Our research showed that nearly half of young people who experience sectarian bullying behaviour do not report it. Based on our survey findings, only 15% of children and young people experienced sectarian bullying behaviour and reported it to an adult. The issue of not reporting came up frequently in our focus groups. Reasons for this included:

Fear of retaliation:

Many young people worry about the consequences of speaking out.

"Some people are like if I told this teacher that here, is something going to happen about it or is it going to make it worse?" – young person from our focus groups

"They just don't think it's serious as it is. Like, a little silly comment, you know, they just kind of brush it off." – Young person from our focus groups

Normalisation of sectarian language and behaviour:

Some do not view certain behaviours as bullying behaviour because they have been exposed to them from a young age.

"You're used to it now." – young person from our focus groups

Young person: "Did anyone ever get called a Fenian?"... Another young person in response: "Oh my god. All the time. Like, all the time, but, like, it's always, like, you wee Fenian and all, like, I was just, like, bringing it up out of the blue, like why are you even starting this?"

Lack of confidence in adults' responses:

Only 40% of young people who reported sectarian bullying behaviour felt that their complaint was handled effectively.

"They [schools] do nothing." – Young person from our focus groups

"nothing they (parents) can do because it's just people from different places and they can't really tell them off if they're not your child." – Young person from our focus groups

Desire to avoid conflict:

Some choose to ignore sectarian bullying behaviour rather than escalate tensions.

"Some people are afraid to tell just out of pure fear, and it could also be related to anxiety or PTSD from previous bullying." – young person from our focus groups

Encouraging young people to report sectarian bullying behaviour requires a shift in cultural attitudes, alongside practical measures such as clearer reporting mechanisms and ensuring that reports are taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTING SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

FOR EDUCATORS, YOUTH WORKERS, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

1

Incorporate education on sectarianism in history and citizenship lessons.

- Embed discussions on sectarianism within the broader curriculum, linking it to themes of human rights, diversity, and social cohesion.
- Use age-appropriate resources that explore the historical and social roots of sectarianism in Northern Ireland while encouraging critical thinking and empathy.
- Facilitate open and respectful conversations where young people can reflect on their own experiences and challenge stereotypes in a safe environment.

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"Like a focus group in school, really, like, or a focus group in youth club or a school or, like, a community... So pretty much talking about, like, a focus group talking about their problems and how to fix it and their struggles on how to fix it as well." – Young person from our focus groups

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2

Promote long-term cross-community engagement beyond short-term initiatives.

- Develop sustained partnership programmes between schools, youth groups, and community organisations from different backgrounds to encourage ongoing relationships.
- Support initiatives like joint sports teams, arts projects, and leadership programmes that bring young people together around shared interests rather than focusing solely on differences.
- Provide opportunities for young people to collaborate on community projects, allowing them to work towards common goals and build meaningful friendships.

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"trying to stop the normalisation of just like, like people just treating you differently. Because that's just so normalised here." – Young person from our focus groups

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3

Encourage reporting mechanisms in schools, youth groups, and online spaces.

- Establish clear and confidential channels for reporting sectarian bullying behaviour, ensuring young people feel safe to come forward.
- Train staff and volunteers on how to handle reports effectively, responding in a way that prioritises the safety and well-being of those affected.
- Work with young people to co-design reporting systems, ensuring they are accessible and relevant to their needs.

4 Train the children's workforce on trauma-informed approaches to sectarian bullying behaviour.

- Ensure that educators and youth workers understand the long-term impact of sectarianism on children's mental health and well-being.
- Provide training on recognising signs of trauma and responding in ways that are sensitive, supportive, and do not further alienate affected young people.
- Integrate mental health support into bullying behaviour prevention work, offering guidance on how to build resilience and provide appropriate interventions.

5 Address stigma around community identifiers (e.g., football shirts, school uniforms) rather than banning them.

- Foster open discussions about the meaning behind community symbols and challenge negative assumptions rather than reinforcing divisions through outright bans.
- Promote respect for individual identity while educating young people on how these symbols can be perceived and misused in harmful ways.
- Encourage inclusive policies that create safe environments where young people feel comfortable expressing their identities without fear of discrimination.

6 Encourage adults to be mindful of the impact of sectarian tensions on children.

- Support parents, teachers, and youth workers in recognising how sectarian attitudes and conflicts influence young people's behaviour and well-being.
- Provide training and resources to help adults reflect on their own biases and how they may unintentionally reinforce divisions.
- Encourage positive role modelling by ensuring that community leaders and educators demonstrate respectful and inclusive behaviour in their interactions.

7 Equip professionals with tools and confidence to challenge sectarian attitudes.

- Provide ongoing professional development that equips staff with the skills to challenge sectarian language, behaviours, and prejudices effectively.
- Develop clear guidance on addressing difficult conversations and de-escalating conflict in classrooms, youth centres, and community spaces.
- Create peer support networks for professionals, allowing them to share best practices and seek advice on tackling sectarianism in their work.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONDING TO SECTARIAN BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

1 Ensure young people feel safe to report incidents without fear of retaliation.

- Establish confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms, such as online forms, anonymous reporting boxes, and trusted adults within schools and youth settings.
- Provide staff with training on how to handle disclosures sensitively and ensure young people understand their rights and protections.
- Foster a culture where speaking out is encouraged, and young people see that reports lead to meaningful action.



"Some people don't feel safe when they are speaking about it. Don't know if it's going to stop it or it's going to make it worse. So reassurance of it's going to help." – Young person from our focus groups



2 Respond consistently and fairly – schools and community organisations should have clear policies.

- Develop and implement robust anti-bullying policies that specifically address sectarian bullying behaviour, ensuring they are aligned with wider safeguarding and equality frameworks.
- Train staff to apply policies consistently, using clear procedures to investigate incidents and determine appropriate interventions.
- Regularly review policies with input from young people, parents, and community leaders to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

3 Use restorative practice approaches where appropriate to address harm and build understanding.

- Equip staff with training in restorative practices to facilitate structured conversations between those affected by bullying behaviour.
- Encourage young people to reflect on their actions and the impact they have on others, with the goal of repairing relationships and fostering mutual understanding.
- Ensure that restorative approaches are voluntary and supported by trained facilitators to prevent further harm or victimisation.

4 Provide accessible support for victims, including counselling and peer mentoring.

- Ensure that schools and community organisations have trained staff who can provide emotional support, signposting to professional counselling where needed.
- Develop peer mentoring schemes where young people can support each other, particularly those who have experienced sectarian bullying behaviour.
- Offer safe spaces where affected children and young people can talk about their experiences and access coping strategies.

5

Engage parents and carers in positive conversations about sectarian attitudes.

- Provide workshops and resources to help parents understand the impact of sectarian bullying behaviour and how they can foster positive attitudes at home.
- Encourage open dialogue between parents, schools, and community groups to address concerns and reinforce shared values of respect and inclusion.
- Promote role modelling of inclusive behaviour within families and challenge negative stereotypes through constructive discussions.

**"More talks like this." (in reference to the focus group)
- Young person from our focus groups**

7

Collaborate with police and community leaders to tackle bullying behaviour in public spaces.

- Strengthen partnerships between schools, youth organisations, the PSNI, and local community leaders to create a coordinated response to sectarian bullying behaviour.
- Implement community-based interventions such as youth outreach programmes and safe spaces where young people from different backgrounds can interact positively.
- Work with local authorities to identify and address high-risk areas where sectarian bullying behaviour may occur, ensuring that young people feel safe in their communities.

RELATED ISSUES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE

Our focus groups highlighted that bullying behaviour, particularly discriminatory bullying behaviour, remains a significant issue in Northern Ireland today. A notable number of participants reported experiences of racist and anti-immigration abuse and bullying behaviour, with some young people perceiving this as an increasing problem. While this report focuses primarily on sectarian bullying behaviour, we felt it was important to acknowledge and include these concerns.

"I've seen somebody get bullied because of their race." - Young person from our focus groups

"like, whenever I would do shared education in primary school. And, like, it's not even just sectarian. It's just, like, racist as well because my old primary school was, like, an anti-cultural primary school ... and then, like, they would always call people, like, really racist names and stuff, and, yeah." Young person from our focus groups

"It's also the same with minorities, like, if you're in a Catholic area, and you may be Muslim. Then obviously you might not be able feel as safe sharing your religion as saying you're Muslim because of fear of maybe being harmed or like offended by your race or religion" - Young person from our focus groups



NEXT STEPS

Our small scale research shows that sectarian bullying behaviour remains a significant concern for many young people in NI, more than a quarter of a century after the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998. While there has been considerable progress over the years, and important work continues across education and communities to promote cohesion and inclusion, some children and young people continue to report experiences of sectarian bullying behaviour in schools, in their communities, and online.

At present, there is limited public national data collection on the prevalence or impact of bullying behaviour among children and young people including bullying behaviour related to sectarianism, which can make it difficult to understand the full picture. We believe there would be real value in wider research into this issue, particularly from the perspective of children and young people themselves.

Our research also highlights that some school staff may lack confidence when responding to incidents of sectarian bullying and that there is an issue with sectarian bullying behaviour in the wider community. More tailored training, guidance, and practical resources could help to ensure that all staff feel equipped to address these complex situations appropriately and supportively.

Efforts to build understanding between communities continue to play an important role in addressing the root causes of sectarian bullying behaviour. We suggest that support for parents and carers could also be beneficial – helping families to have open conversations with children about identity, inclusion, and difference, and to challenge prejudices that may risk being passed from one generation to the next.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has developed a wider set of policy recommendations aimed at reducing bullying behaviour and promoting inclusion for all children, which you can access [here](#).





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