



What is the (No Blame) Support Group Method?

When bullying has been observed or reported then the (No Blame) Support Group Method offers a simple seven-step procedure, which can be used by a teacher or other facilitator. Note that each step has been carefully planned as a single part of the whole and variations may undermine the success of the method. The steps are summarised below:

Step one – talk with the victim

When the facilitator finds out that bullying has happened, she starts by talking to the victim. During this conversation the listener encourages the victim to describe how he feels with reflective comments such as, “That must be very hard for you ... So you have felt really upset”.

The purpose is not to discover factual evidence about this or other events; if the victim wants to include evidence in the account this is always reframed to establish the resulting distress. For example a comment like, “They have all been ignoring me, nobody will talk to me.” might be replied to with a response like, “So, you felt really lonely and you were upset that you had nobody to talk to”.

It is important that the victim understands and gives consent to the process. Sometimes there may be a fear that it could lead to further victimisation but when the non-punitive aspect is fully explained the victim usually feels safe, and relieved that something is being done. He may want the perpetrators to understand how much distress has been caused. Talking to someone else who has been through the experience might give further reassurance.

The facilitator should end the meeting by:

- Checking that nothing confidential has been discussed which should not be disclosed to the group.
- Asking the victim to suggest the names of those involved, some colluders or observers and some friends who will make up the group.
- Inviting the victim to produce a piece of writing or a picture which will illustrate his unhappiness.
- Offering the victim an opportunity to talk again at any time during the procedure if things are not going well.

The victim is not invited to join the group to present his own account, as it is possible that he will make accusations, provoke denial or justification and undermine the problem-solving approach.

Step two – convene a meeting with the people involved

The facilitator arranges to meet with the group of pupils who have been involved and suggested by the victim. A group of six to eight works well. This is an opportunity for the facilitator to use her judgement to balance the group so that helpful and reliable young people are included alongside those whose behaviour has been causing distress. The aim is to use the strengths of group members to bring about the best outcome.

Step three – explain the problem

The facilitator starts by telling the group that she has a problem - she is worried about “John” who is having a very hard time at the moment. She recounts the story of the victim’s unhappiness and uses the piece of writing or a drawing to emphasise his distress. At no time does she discuss the details of the incidents or allocate blame to the group.

Step four – share responsibility

When the account is finished, the listeners may look downcast or uncomfortable and be uncertain about the reason for the meeting. Some may be anxious about possible punishment. The facilitator makes a change in the mood here by stating explicitly that:

- No-one is in trouble or going to be punished
- There is a joint responsibility to help John to be happy and safe
- The group has been convened to help solve the problem.

Step five – ask the group members for their ideas

Group members are usually genuinely moved by the account of John’s distress and relieved that they are not in trouble. No-one has been pushed into a defensive corner by accusations and the power of the group has shifted from the “bully leader” to the group as a whole, whose members withdraw consent for the behaviour to continue.

Each member of the group is then encouraged to suggest a way in which the victim could be helped to feel happier. These ideas are stated in the “I” language of intention. “I will walk to school with him.” “I will ask him to sit with me at dinner.” Ideas are owned by the group members and not imposed by the facilitator. She makes positive responses but she does not go on to extract a promise of improved behaviour.

Step six – leave it up to them

The facilitator ends the meeting by passing over the responsibility to the group to solve the problem. No written record is made - it is left as a matter of trust. She thanks them, expresses confidence in a positive outcome and arranges to meet with them again to see how things are going.

Step seven – meet them again

About a week later, the teacher discusses with each student, including the victim, how things have been going. This allows the teacher to monitor the bullying and keeps the young people involved in the process.

These meetings are with one group member at a time so that each can give a statement about his contribution without creating a competitive atmosphere. It does not matter if everyone has not kept to his intention, as long as the bullying has stopped. The victim does not have to become the most popular person in school, just to be safe and happy.

The entire process showing the seven steps is available as a training video (Michael's Story - The No Blame Approach. Maines and Robinson, 1992). A fuller account of the development of the work is published in a book “Crying for Help.” Robinson and Maines 1997 Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd.

In 1996-8 Kingston upon Hull Behaviour Support Service started a project to support schools with antibullying work. They used a variation of the No Blame Approach and followed up 50 cases. They had an immediate 80% success rate and with further support all cases were successful or partially successful. The article appeared in Educational Psychology in Practice April 1998.