



**Response to the CALL FOR EVIDENCE to inform the COMMITTEE  
STAGE OF Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 PlayBoard is an independent charity and the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. Since our establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's right to play through a combination of: service delivery, service development; campaigning, lobbying; awareness raising and working in partnership with others to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers. The organisation takes great pride in promoting best practice in Play, Playwork and play based School Age Childcare services.

PlayBoard's mission is to drive the play agenda, ensuring that at every level of decision-making across society, the child's right to play is not only recognised but is made a reality within the lives of children, young people, families and communities. Children and young people's views, aspirations and perceptions of themselves and the environment in which they live, are at the heart of PlayBoard's work. Our vision is of a society where the right to play is realised.

PlayBoard as the lead organisation for the promotion, development and delivery of play, playwork and School Age Childcare in Northern Ireland welcome the opportunity to inform the Committee Stage of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill.

- 1.2 In our response we welcome the introduction of the Bill, whilst acknowledging the ability of play and playwork to be protective factors in preventing bullying and the development of children's self-esteem through for example, better play opportunities in the playground, promoting self-directed play, the use of loose parts, the promotion of free-play and the need to engender positive playgrounds.

## **2.0 Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill as introduced**

- 2.1 We commend the Bill for attempting to define bullying whilst recognising that as noted in a Committee hearing, from a legislative perspective *[t]here is no*

*clear, international, recognised definition of bullying*<sup>1</sup>. Bullying is a very serious issue that 'causes immediate harm and distress to the victim and has negative long-term consequences for the victim's mental health'<sup>2</sup>. Farrington also notes that one of the major definitional problems with bullying is deciding where teasing ends and bullying begins. Farrington's seminal paper indicated that bullies and victims were generally less prevalent in secondary schools (age eleven to sixteen) compared to in primary schools (age seven to eleven). Should this remain the case, bullying among younger children must be a priority for the Department and primary schools. On this note we are surprised that para. 4(1) appears to exclude nursery school pupils from the Bill. In light of the preventative approach being adopted by the proposed legislation, this is surprising and we would urge further consideration.

- 2.2 We accept that one of the biggest issue for policymakers, Boards' of Governors, parents, schools and pupils themselves is how to address bullying amidst the prevalence of social media and the likelihood of cyberbullying among children and young people. Therefore we warmly welcome the inclusion of '*electronic communication*' within the Bill.
- 2.3 We are grateful too, to the Committee for teasing out a number of issues that add to the complexity of legislating for addressing bullying in schools including: the requirement for schools to record bullying incidents on a central IT system, the possibility of 'bullying' league tables emerging, concerns regarding the ability of schools to deal with homophobic issues as part of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and in highlighting the need for the Department to not just deal with the after-effects of bullying but to proactively seek to prevent bullying.
- 2.4 The bullying literature consistently highlights bullying as being more likely to occur when adult supervision or surveillance is low, for example at playtime, in the school playground. Bullying also occurs in the classroom, hallways,

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<sup>1</sup> Committee for Education (2015). Minutes of Evidence meeting on Wednesday 4 November

<sup>2</sup> Farrington, D. P. (1993). Understanding and preventing bullying. Crime and justice, 381-458.

lunchroom and on the way to and from school<sup>3</sup>. Given the last point, we welcome the inclusion of para. 2(1)(b)(ii) '*while travelling to or from the school during the school term*'.

- 2.5 In addition we would contend that the Department has a remit for addressing bullying where a school provides wrap-around childcare, homework clubs or extra-curricular activities. The wording of the Bill does not appear to be clear on how the school day is defined. Para. 2(1)(b)(i) states '*on the premises of the school during the school day*' but is 'the school day' the formal educational day or does it extend to the increasingly 'informal day', which encompasses childcare, homework clubs and extra-curricular activities. We believe it is important that the legislation includes activities provided by the school on the school premises during the 'informal school day'. Many of these activities are play-based, they promote children's personal development, self-esteem, confidence and resilience, all of which are critically important to developing the characteristics so often lacking in the victims of bullying.

### **3.0 Play as a protective factor, preventing bullying**

- 3.1 Generally, bullies are aggressive, tough, strong, confident, and impulsive, while victims are unpopular, lonely, rejected, anxious, depressed, unwilling to retaliate and lacking in self-esteem<sup>4</sup>. Sometimes bullies are also victims and vice versa. Thompson and Smith (2011<sup>5</sup>, 2009<sup>6</sup>) rehearse numerous anti-bullying strategies that schools should consider introducing, many of which take place in the playground. Ttofi and Farrington<sup>7</sup> in their systematic and meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of school-based programmes to

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, F., & Smith, P. K. (2011). The use and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies in schools. Research Brief DFE-RR098. Available at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182421/DFE-RR098.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182421/DFE-RR098.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, F., & Smith, P. K. (2012). Anti-bullying strategies in schools: what is done and what works. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 9(II). Available at: [http://www.bullyingandcyber.net/media/cms\\_page\\_media/55/Thompson-Smith2.pdf](http://www.bullyingandcyber.net/media/cms_page_media/55/Thompson-Smith2.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ttofi, M. M., & Farrington, D. P. (2011). Effectiveness of school-based programs to reduce bullying: A systematic and meta-analytic review. Journal of Experimental Criminology, 7(1), 27-56.

reduce bullying found 'more intensive programs were more effective, as were programs including ... improved playground supervision'.

3.2 For many years, PlayBoard's Positive PlayGrounds programme has recognised and supported schools, teachers and staff to facilitate children's self-directed play at playtimes. The lack of opportunities and time for children to play during their playtime emerged as a theme in the findings of the recent Kids Life and Times survey (2014). PlayBoard working with the Centre for Children's Rights QUB, raised a module on children's play opportunities in their homes, schools and communities<sup>8</sup>. The majority of children who responded to the KLT survey were positive about their opportunities to play but there were a number of notable issues relating to play in school, including:

- Almost a quarter (24%) of children feeling they did not have a good choice of things to play with in their school playground.
- Over a fifth (22%) felt they did not have enough time to play during the school day.
- Children reported being able to play more freely with friends in school (84%), compared with being able to play with friends when in their communities or homes (77%).
- Children reported feeling safer when playing in school (89%), compared with feeling safe when playing in their communities or homes (73%).
- Girls reported being more positive about play in the school context.

3.3 These findings underscore how important the school environment is for children's play. However the school playground is also consistently found to be a place where incidences of 'traditional' bullying are most likely to occur<sup>9</sup>. This leads us to contend that schools need to take the necessary steps to

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<sup>8</sup> McQuade, L., Kehoe, S., and Emerson, L. (2015). Are children getting the opportunities to realise their right to play, Kids Life and Times Survey  
<http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update98.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Op cit. 2

ensure the school playground is a safe, inclusive and positive experience for pupils, that the space is designed to be supportive of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), article 31 (the right to play), and is conducive to preventing bullying by facilitating play opportunities that may contribute to developing children's confidence, self-esteem and resilience, particularly for those children who might be susceptible to being the victims of bullies.

#### **4.0 Concluding Comments**

- 4.1 PlayBoard welcome the Department's Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill. We particularly welcome the inclusion of '*electronic communication*' within the definition; the duty placed on Boards' of Governors to 2(1)(a) *ensure that policies designed to prevent bullying among pupils registered at the school are pursued at the school*; the inclusion of 2(1)(b)(ii) *while travelling to or from the school during the school term*; and 2(1)(b)(iii) *while the pupil is in the lawful control or charge of a member of the staff of the school*.
- 4.2 However, given the likelihood of more schools providing wrap-around School Age Childcare, the growing prevalence of 'Homework Clubs' and extra-curricular activities, we contend that the wording of 2(1)(b)(i) which states '*on the premises of the school during the school day*' may, require further refinement, particularly as to what constitutes 'during the school day'. Arguably bullying is as likely to happen within the 'informal' school day context as during the 'formal' school day.
- 4.3 Going forward, we urge that when Boards' of Governors are revising measures as required by 2(1)(d) they consult in a meaningful way, particularly with the registered pupils at the schools, in an attempt to unearth the children and young people's perspectives on solutions to preventing and irradiating bullying in schools.
- 4.4 Lastly, we are surprised that children from nursery school appear to be excluded from the Bill and can only conclude that this is on the basis of their

age or because they are not attending statutory education. We would urge the Department to reconsider the exclusion of pupils attending nursery schools on the basis that enormous preventative work can be achieved with the younger age groups.

- 4.5 PlayBoard welcomes further discussion with the Department on any of the points mentioned above and is happy to be considered for oral evidence sessions in relation to the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill.

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