



Addressing conflicts in ways that build social competence

(W@S research brief: March 2012)

Two different ways of thinking about changing behaviour

This research brief discusses some of the different ways incidents of conflict, and in particular, bullying behaviour, can be addressed in a school setting.

There are debates in the literature about the most effective ways to address bullying behaviour. This literature suggests there is still much to be learnt about what works best, for whom, in what situations. However, most evidence suggests a systems-based **whole-school approach** is the most effective way of **managing change** and **creating a safe and caring climate that deters behaviours such as bullying** (for more information see the [W@S research brief: whole-school approach to change using the Wellbeing@School tools](#)).

Within the overall framework of a whole-school approach, views vary as to the best way to address particular incidents of bullying. Overall, two main approaches are favoured by Western countries (Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Rigby, 2006). One group of countries (including Europe and the USA) favour approaches that are more **traditional** in that they are teacher-led and discipline-focused (e.g., with rules, consequences and sanctions for those who engage in bullying behaviours).

Another group of countries which includes the UK, Australia and New Zealand favour approaches to thinking about behaviour and behaviour management that are more aligned with ideas about **positive youth development**. These approaches are called “**social problem-solving**” as they actively involve students, and also sometimes parents and whānau, working with schools to create solutions. They can also be adapted to suit the context and values of a particular school.

Positive youth development is an umbrella term that describes many different approaches. What these approaches have in common is that they:

- emphasise and **draw on the strengths and resources of young people** in a way that builds their skills and competences
- think **holistically about health and wellbeing** and the multiple factors that influence it
- aim to **support a community to work together** to enhance common protective factors and reduce risk factors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002).

Studies show that traditional discipline-based approaches only tend to show short-term success. Because of this, researchers are increasingly suggesting we need to explore



approaches that build students' strengths and competencies to see if these can support longer term change in schools (Rigby, 2006; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

This research brief discusses the characteristics of **traditional** and **social problem-solving** approaches, outlines some common social problem-solving approaches and then discusses their fit with *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Traditional approaches

The traditional approach to student behaviour management is based on behavioural theory—that people will change their behaviour based on sanctions and rewards. International studies suggest that this still tends to be the most common approach in schools in terms of addressing behaviours such as bullying.

This traditional approach is also called “punitive” because it rests on the idea that certain types of behaviour are wrong and need to be controlled by some form of disincentive or removal of rewards (i.e., a “punishment”).

In terms of bullying behaviours, the traditional approach has a focus on **students reporting to adults and adults taking action to “fix” situations**. It does not offer a solution to the findings from studies which show that many bullying incidents are not reported, that students perceive schools are not addressing their concerns or that reporting bullying to teachers can make the bullying worse (Nairn & Smith, 2002; Rigby, 2010b). A further critique of traditional approaches is that they **do not provide students (or teachers and parents) with learning opportunities**. Those involved may not be supported to understand the impact and origins of their actions or be involved in the decision making that accompanies the giving of sanctions.

There is general agreement in the literature that **“zero tolerance” attitudes** to bullying can be valuable in establishing a safe and caring school climate (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2008; Bickmore, 2010; Noddings, 2008; Rigby, 2010a) but use of punitive or “zero tolerance” behaviour management approaches, such as expulsion from school, results in early school leaving which contributes to longer term societal problems. Early school leaving has a well-documented longer term detrimental impact on young people's education and health outcomes. Therefore, rather than expelling students, there is a need to find ways of supporting young people to stay at school, and to create a climate which supports caring behaviours and respectful interactions.

The traditional approach to bullying behaviour

- development of school policies about bullying
- provision of information to students and the school community about what is and is not acceptable
- development of school rules or guidelines about bullying
- investigation of incidents of bullying
- application of sanctions, penalties or punishments to offenders (such as time-out, detentions, stand-downs, expulsion or suspension) (summarised from Rigby, 2010a)



Māori and Pacific students are overrepresented in stand-down and suspension statistics. Macfarlane (2009) notes that punitive discipline or “punish and control” approaches have not served Māori students well. This suggests there is a need to find more culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning as well as thinking about and managing behaviour.

Social problem solving—an alternative approach

Alternatives to traditional behaviour management approaches support young people and schools to work together to resolve conflicts by engaging in acts of “**social problem solving**” in ways that draw on community knowledge to develop strategies for change. Social problem-solving approaches are one form of positive youth development. They can also be called other terms such as “strengths-based”.

In terms of bullying behaviour, social problem-solving approaches **seek students’ involvement in developing solutions** (thus acknowledging that the peer group is an important mediator of bullying behaviours).

At the heart of social problem-solving approaches are the concepts of **agency and choice**. These approaches also draw on cognitive principles of development.

Social-problem solving approaches aim to:

- utilise students’ existing strategies and competencies
- offer learning experiences that support students to develop an increased range of prosocial strategies and behaviours (e.g., helping, caring, empathic and social problem-solving behaviours)
- reduce behaviours such as aggression, bullying or violence.

Social problem-solving approaches are based on the assumption that, rather than behaviour being fixed (i.e., a child is labelled as aggressive, a bully or a victim), **young people can grow and learn new behaviours and strategies** through being participants in the development of solutions, and by being given the autonomy to reflect on actions and make changes. Through this process the community that surrounds the young people also enhances its knowledge about how to better meet young people’s needs.

Social problem-solving approaches can be mostly **adult-led** or mostly **student-led**. They can be also **proactive or preventative** in that they support students to develop social and conflict resolution skills, or they can be **reactive** in that they support schools and students to address particular incidents. This is not a clear dichotomy as some approaches, such as restorative practices, can also be used in schools in ways that are preventative.

See the W@S research brief, [Building social competency](#), for a discussion of proactive or preventative approaches.

In this research brief we have included an overview of the approaches that can be used for **reactive purposes**. We have included those approaches when there is some evidence they have been linked to decreases in aggression or bullying behaviours. In general, the literature suggests these approaches can be used to resolve minor to major incidents of conflict (acknowledging that some severe or crisis incidents may need



different approaches). The approaches overviewed in this research brief are summarised below.

Table 1 **Social problem-solving approaches**

Approach	Main aim	Reactive or proactive?	Mostly adult- or student-led?	People commonly involved
Restorative practices	To repair relationships and wellbeing	Reactive, but can be used in ways that are proactive	Most adult-led but can also be student-led	Ranges from a discussion between two people to a meeting between school staff, all students involved in an incident, their parents, whānau and community members.
Method of shared concern	To restore wellbeing by changing peer group dynamics	Reactive	Adult-led by school facilitator	A facilitator gathers information and ideas about solutions from school staff, the students involved in an incident and their parents and whānau. The perceived victim of the incident is talked to separately.
Support group method	To increase students' empathy and ability to solve social problems	Reactive	Adult-led by school facilitator	The facilitator works with a group of students involved in an incident and nominated peer supporters to find solutions. The perceived victim of the incident is talked to separately.
Peer mediators	To build students' ability to resolve social problems at early stages	Both reactive and proactive	Mostly student-led	Trained student mediators support other students to resolve conflicts.
Kaupapa Māori approaches*	Varies	Varies	Mostly adult-led	Varies

* This category includes a number of different approaches.

Social problem-solving approaches are sometimes used in combination with each other. For example, schools using restorative practices may also have a team of peer mediators and a buddy system. It is important that these approaches are not viewed as stand-alone ways of managing behaviour. Instead, they need to be embedded within an overall approach to creating a safe and caring school climate.

Restorative practices

The aim of restorative practices is to repair relationships through the use of a community problem-solving process. Restorative practices can range from informal conversations at school to formal hui and community conferences (which may include all students involved in an incident, parents and whānau, teachers and other school staff, and community members).



In New Zealand, restorative practices are a common adult-led problem-solving approach that has been used to address incidents of conflict including bullying behaviour. The underpinning philosophy of restorative practices is that wrongdoing is perceived as **damage done to a relationship** and can best **be repaired by those most directly involved working together to find solutions** (Macfarlane & Margrain, 2011). This contrasts with the traditional approach which sees wrongdoing as being about rule breaking which needs to be punished. Macfarlane (2007) considers restorative practices are about developing “new ways of speaking” that move away from punitive or judgemental forms to those that are respectful and forward looking. Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh and Bateman (2007) suggest that the overall aim of restorative practices is to create a “culture of care”.

In New Zealand, restorative practices draw from the successful use of family group conferences in the youth justice system, which in turn stems from Māori cultural practices. The use of restorative practices is growing in New Zealand schools. In a 2009 survey, half of a sample of primary principals and almost two-thirds of the secondary sample reported that their schools were using some form of restorative practice (Hipkins, 2010). Under the umbrella of restorative practices, schools are using a wide variety of processes (Buckley & Maxwell, 2007; Gordon, 2011). Some also blend restorative practices with the other social problem-solving approaches discussed in this research brief.

Matla and Jansen (2011) suggest that the essence of a restorative conversation involves four philosophical questions:

- **Tell the story** (What happened?)
- **Explore the harm** (Who has been affected and how?)
- **Repair the harm** (What do we need to do to put things right?)
- **Move forward** (How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?)

Jansen and Matla (2011) suggest that different forms of restorative practices can be used depending on the seriousness of a conflict or incident. Minor incidents can be addressed by informal means such as a restorative conversation between two or more people. If incidents are more serious, more people can be involved.

One more formal restorative practice that can be used to address more serious incidents is a full community hui or conference. This typically involves a teacher or community support person facilitating a discussion that allows each party (all the students involved and their parents and whānau, teachers and other school staff, and community support people) to describe what happened, their perspective on what led or contributed to the behaviour, what hurt has been done and what needs to be done to put it right. There is an expectation that perpetrators will take responsibility for their actions, and that group members are working towards forgiveness. One approach to community conferences that draws on Māori cultural protocols is te hui whakatika (one translation is “meeting together to put an issue right”).



There is evidence that different forms of restorative practices can be beneficial for a range of New Zealand students and schools (Gordon, 2011), and that more culturally-based forms can be beneficial for Māori students and their schools (Adair & Dixon, 2000; Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, & Macfarlane, 2010; Wearmouth, Glynn, & Berryman, 2005). A recent study by Gordon (2011) of 10 schools that used a range of forms of restorative practices showed a variety of benefits including decreased stand-downs and suspensions, enhanced perceptions of school climate and decreases in behaviour incidents. Similar findings were reported from an evaluation of te hui whakatika by Adair and Dixon (2000).

Both Adair and Dixon (2000) and Gordon (2011) found some schools embedded restorative principles and approaches more fully than others. Gordon (2011) suggested that schools needed to fully embrace the “social justice” principles of a restorative approach for it to be truly effective. Strong leadership and effective systems for embedding this way of thinking and working within a school were also needed. Similarly, Adair and Dixon (2000) found that even after professional learning sessions, school staff had mixed understandings about the principles of restorative practices with some seeing the conferences as part of a traditional approach to develop consequences to “punish” a wrong-doer. Some schools also found it hard to find time to organise and implement the full family conferences.

Wearmouth et al. (2005) consider that to hold restorative hui, schools need to be able to acknowledge and use family and community resources and understand hui protocol. They suggest that schools seek guidance from Māori colleagues and members of the community. They also comment that those involved may have different views about the causes of problem behaviours and which behaviours are important for wellbeing. For example, school processes might be part of the problem—therefore it might be more appropriate that the hui are held in the community rather than at the school.

In summary, the use of restorative processes challenges the power relationships in schools and offers schools a way of rethinking school practices with a shift towards prioritising respectful relationships and dialogue. There is growing evidence that, to be effective, restorative practices need to be embedded within the way a school works. Acknowledging this, over time, those working in this area have shifted from supporting schools to develop restorative ways of reacting to behaviour incidents, to place **more emphasis on a proactive and preventative approach** that embeds the philosophy and practice of restorative dialoguing within classrooms and schools. In this way, restorative processes act to change the culture of a school.

The method of shared concern

The method of shared concern aims to restore the wellbeing of all involved in bullying incidents by changing group dynamics via a problem-solving process. A series of individual and group meetings with perpetrators and bystanders involved in a particular incident are led by a teacher-facilitator.



The method of shared concern was developed by a Swedish psychologist, Anatol Pikas as a **therapeutic approach to solving bullying incidents involving adolescents** (Pikas, 2002). The method has a number of stages which are managed by a teacher-facilitator. First, the facilitator obtains information about the bullying situation mostly through reports from the peer group, parents, teachers or others, rather than directly from the student experiencing the bullying. This is done to protect this young person from their peers perceiving that they are “telling on” others. The students who are identified as having taken part, either actively or as bystanders, are each interviewed in turn. Each interview starts with an expression of shared concern for the person who is being bullied. If the student acknowledges some awareness of the situation they are asked what they can do to assist in making it better. The emphasis is not on apportioning blame, but rather on changing group dynamics and the situation by encouraging shared problem solving. The facilitator then arranges group meetings to ensure actions are followed through. They also talk separately to the student who has been bullied.

This approach has been successfully used in Spain (Ortega, Del-Rey, & Mora-Mercan, 2004) and the UK (Smith, Sharp, Eslea, & Thompson, 2004). It is viewed as more appropriate for adolescents as it draws on their skills and does not set the facilitator up as an authority figure (Pikas, 2002; Rigby, 2010a). This method has been critiqued for not providing a way of talking with the student who experienced the bullying early on in the process to hear their concerns. Rigby (2010a) also notes that these approaches require considerable time and effort on the part of the teacher-facilitator.

The support group method

The support group method aims to increase students' empathy and ability to resolve issues. A facilitator meets with the person who was bullied and also separately holds a conference with a support group of peers, perpetrators and bystanders. This group is encouraged to take responsibility for the problem and suggest solutions and actions they might take.

The essence of the support group method (which was called the “no blame” method) is that it aims to identify and share how the students feel about being bullied, with the aim of increasing the empathy and problem-solving skills of the students engaging in the bullying behaviour. Macfarlane (2007) provides a description of a support group/no blame method as used by a New Zealand teacher-facilitator:

- **Step 1:** The teacher talks to the student who has been bullied, provides support and asks them to identify the main perpetrators, bystanders and two or three student leaders who could support them. Together this group is called the support group.
- **Step 2:** The student who has been bullied is asked to write a letter outlining how they feel.
- **Step 3:** A conference is called with the support group. This does not include the student who has been bullied. At this conference, students are told they are there to



solve a problem—but not to discuss whose fault it was. The group is read the letter and introduced to a bullying socio-gram. This is a diagram that represents the different roles students can take. This is used to show that students have choices in how they act or react. Each member of the group is then asked how they might help.

- **Step 4:** Follow-up conferences are held with the support group to discuss the actions they are taking. The student who has been bullied continues to be supported by the teacher. A letter is sent home informing parents how their children are positively contributing to school through being a member of the support group.

These discussions allow each party to describe what happened and what led to the behaviour. They are then asked for solutions. A key aspect of this process is that those involved are asked what happened without judgement being made about actions being right or wrong. This is different from a restorative conference in which there is an expectation that people will acknowledge the harm they have caused and the community will look for solutions.

A common criticism of the support group method is that it does not suggest that bullying is “wrong”. Rigby (2010a) and Macfarlane (2007) both consider this critique to be misguided. Macfarlane (2007) notes that the conferences convey a clear sense that bullying is not an acceptable behaviour (whilst not judging individual actions) as the facilitators are encouraged to make statements such as “We don’t accept bullying here.” Rigby (2010a) also suggests that those who criticise this method seem to view all bullying as equally severe behaviour that should be responded to in a punitive manner. He notes that the developers of the support group method stated that more severe incidents need to be addressed in other ways. In New Zealand, this approach is suggested as a process in Kia Kaha resources, but has not been separately evaluated.



Peer mediators, buddies and mentors

Peer approaches aim to develop students' ability to resolve social concerns before they escalate. Peer mediation approaches offer training, usually to a subgroup of selected students, so that they can support their peers in social problem solving. The training focuses on reasoning, social skills and conflict resolution.

Mentor or buddy programmes involve senior student leaders acting as role models. They are trained to support junior students to make the transition into a new school, or build relationships and develop skills in relating to others.

Peer mediation is a common **student-led problem-solving approach** that is used in New Zealand and internationally. This approach grew from studies which showed that student bystanders are often involved in bullying behaviour, and that if peers intervene, bullying stops faster (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010).

Peer mediation training focuses on developing students' understanding about behaviours that are not acceptable and offers students training in reasoning, social skills and conflict resolution. Student leaders can be selected for this training, or all students can be trained in conflict resolution.

As with many approaches, the success of peer mediation seems to rest on how well it is planned, managed and supported. **If not properly managed, there is some evidence that peer approaches could be related to increases in aggressive behaviours** (Blank et al., 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The international literature suggests peer leaders need to be carefully selected to ensure they are known, positive role models who will be able to influence their peers and that the mediators need to be trained and supported by staff. All other students also need to be trained to ensure they possess a range of nonaggressive conflict resolution strategies.

In New Zealand, an evaluation of Cool Schools Peer Mediators found the programme supported students to learn conflict resolution skills and processes and had other positive impacts (Murrow et al., 2004). Variables that contributed to the success of the programme in New Zealand included similar factors to those mentioned above as well as whole-school involvement, a skilled co-ordinator and embedding the approach as a core part of the school's behaviour management system rather than as a stand-alone activity (Murrow, et al., 2004).

Buddy and peer mentor approaches are also examples of student-led approaches that are commonly used in schools. These can be used to create a caring environment in which senior students model effective ways of developing relationship and social problem-solving skills to younger students. The Peer Support Programme: Te Aka Tautoko Ākonga is one example.



Kaupapa Māori approaches

Macfarlane and other researchers suggest that a key alternative to “punish and control” approaches to student behaviour is a focus on developing a “culture of care” in a school. One aim of this culture is to enable student conflicts to be peacefully resolved in a way that is culturally responsive and aligns with Māori worldviews (Cavanagh, et al., 2010).

A number of New Zealand researchers consider restorative practices (discussed above) are one way of working in a culturally responsive and relationship-based way to solve conflicts and repair relationships (Macfarlane, 2007; Margrain & Macfarlane, 2011; Wearmouth, et al., 2005; Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007). Researchers have also developed other frameworks and programmes that are based on Māori worldviews (Advisory Group on Conduct Problems, 2011; Macfarlane, 2004, 2007; Margrain & Macfarlane, 2011; Wearmouth, et al., 2005). Some frameworks provide ways of thinking about, as well as resolving, conflict. These approaches can be loosely placed on a continuum from holistic approaches that aim to create relational and safe learning environments for Māori students, to those that are more specifically focused on addressing challenging behaviour. One example is briefly described below.

In the book, *Discipline, Democracy, and Diversity*, Macfarlane outlines the Hikairo Rationale which is a “culturally responsive approach to working with students with behaviour difficulties” (2007, p. 115). The Hikairo Rationale is presented through the metaphor of Te Rākau (the tree) which symbolises strength and life. The basis or roots (Orangatanga) sustain and support a trunk and five branches. As shown in Table 2, the seven elements of Te Rākau are:

Table 2 **The Hikairo Rationale***

Huakina mai	(Opening doorways to relationships and communication)
Ihi	(Being assertive)
Kōtahitanga	(Seeking collaboration between home and school)
Awhinatia	(Helping learners by moving towards restorative practice)
I runga i te manaaki	(Caring that pervades—the trunk of Te Rākau)
Rangatiratanga	(Motivating learners)
Orangatanga	(Developing a nurturing environment—the roots of Te Rākau)

* Adapted from Macfarlane (2007)

A range of other approaches based on Māori worldviews are described in “Part 4: Te ao Māori perspective on understanding conduct problems” in the document, [**Conduct problems: Effective services for 8–12-year-olds \(Advisory Group on Conduct Problems, 2011\)**](#). This document includes a discussion about ways of thinking about behaviour from a Māori worldview, information about different models and programmes and discussion of what constitutes evidence of success.

The connection between social problem-solving approaches and educational directions in New Zealand

While there are ongoing debates about the relative merits of traditional and social problem-solving approaches to behaviour, the focus of **social problem-solving**



approaches on building students' skills and strategies appears to have a **stronger alignment with the intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum, Ka Hikitia*** and current good practice in education, than traditional views of, and approaches to, behaviour. Some of these alignments are discussed below.

Connections with *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), and in particular, the Health and Physical Education learning area, states that, for students to lead full and satisfying lives, among other things, they need to be supported to: build resilience, a positive identity and empathy; learn how to co-operate and negotiate; and develop competencies for mental wellness and safety management. Therefore it is vital that we work to equip young people with the skills and competencies they need to function in their communities, engage in prosocial interactions, as well as identify and address behaviours that are less positive influences in their social environment, such as bullying.

A traditional approach to health and wellbeing is for students to be the recipients of school health services that are designed for them by others. In contrast, the Health and Physical Education learning area, as well as recent international approaches to health education in schools, place emphasis on students actively **“learning for” their, their peers’ or their communities’ health and wellbeing** through **“learning by doing”**. Embedding approaches to social problem solving within the classroom programme and school-wide practices is one way of supporting students to “learn by doing”.

For an overview of some of the Health and Physical Education achievement objectives that appear well-aligned with the aims and processes of social problem-solving approaches, see the [Connections between-W@S and educational directions in New Zealand](#) information sheet.

Final comment

The approaches overviewed in this research brief are one vehicle to create a safer and more caring school climate. They need to be supported by activities that relate to other aspects of the school system. Current research suggests that use of social problem-solving approaches that rest on principles of youth development are best done by embedding this way of thinking about young people, relationships and dialogue about behaviour throughout different dimensions of school practice. Viewing these approaches solely as a behaviour management tool, or as a process used only by a small number of specialist staff, is likely to result in less successful outcomes.

Further information

For more information about positive youth development approaches, see the Wellbeing@School literature overview:

[Link to W@S Overview paper](#)

[Link to W@S summary booklet](#)



For more information about the different approaches discussed in this research brief see:

Restorative practices

- [Berryman, M., & Bateman, S. \(2008\). Effective bicultural leadership: A way to restore harmony at school and avoid suspension. set: *Research Information for Teachers*, 1, 25–29.](#)
- Buckley, S., & Maxwell, G. (2007). *Respectful schools: Restorative practices in education: A summary report*. Wellington: Office of the Children's Commissioner and The Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University. At: <http://ips.ac.nz/events/downloads/Respectful%20schools.pdf>
- Macfarlane, A. (2007). *Discipline, democracy, and diversity*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
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- Rigby, K. (2010). *Bullying interventions in school: Six basic approaches*. Camberwell, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Kaupapa Māori approaches

- Advisory Group on Conduct Problems. (2011). Part 4: Te ao Māori perspective on understanding conduct problems. In *Conduct problems: Effective services for 8–12-year-olds* (pp. 39–67). Wellington: Ministry for Social Development. At: <http://youthjustice.co.nz/sites/default/files/conduct-problems-8-12.pdf>
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Peer mediation and mentoring

- Cool Schools Peer Mediators: <http://www.peace.net.nz/index.php?pageID=24>
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- Peer Support Programme: Te Aka Tautoko Ākonga: <http://www.peersupport.org.nz>

Method of shared concern

- McGrath, H., & Noble, T. (2006). *Bullying solutions: Evidence-based approaches to bullying in Australian schools*. Crows Nest, NSW: Pearson Education.
- Rigby, K. (2010). *Bullying interventions in school: Six basic approaches*. Camberwell, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.
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Support group method

- Macfarlane, A. (2007). *Discipline, democracy, and diversity*. Wellington: NZCER Press.



- McGrath, H., & Noble, T. (2006). *Bullying solutions: Evidence-based approaches to bullying in Australian schools*. Crows Nest, NSW: Pearson Education.
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