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Safety, School Connectedness and Problem Behaviour

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Schools and safety

Troublesome (and troubled) behaviour is a feature of all schools and some of the behaviour is simply part of growing up, testing the boundaries of adult authority, as well as the changes associated with adolescence. The difference between ‘troublesome’, ‘anti-social’ and ‘criminal’ is an ongoing debate within this volume. At the most basic level for children in schools it is about whether or not the behaviour they present or experience in and around school affects their achievements in school and general sense of well-being, including whether they feel safe. All this in turn can affect their participation in the life of the school and their sense of belonging or ‘connectedness’ to school. Feeling safe is a basic human need and young people are unlikely to achieve in a context where they do not feel safe. Troublesome behaviour in the school gets in the way of the well-being and potential achievements of the young people involved. Furthermore, some types of behaviour in school are either criminal in their own right, or are related to the later development of criminal behaviour and involvement.

Concerns about school safety have become more prominent in recent years partly because of the growing awareness of high-profile (and rare) events that have led to multiple deaths on the school site. Such school shootings have occurred worldwide and over some time, for example: 1964 Cologne, Germany (10 victims); 1974 Maalot, Israel (26 victims); 1989 Montreal, Canada (14 victims); 1996 Dunblane, Scotland (17 victims); 1999 Columbine, Colorado, USA (13 victims); 2001 Osaka, Japan (8 victims); 2004 Ruzhou, China (8 victims); 2007 Jokela, Finland (8 victims). However, as Debarbieux (2006) points out, most perpetrators of these multiple deaths in schools have been adults. It would be
interesting for the reader to reflect for a moment about whether this last point accords with their perception of who the perpetrators (and victims) are likely to be in these kinds of event. Although schools have had to become more aware of the possibility of mass killings on the school site, most of the time their focus is on the more common and everyday ‘micro-victimisations’, particularly those between young people. Nevertheless, major events often act as a reference point and culmination of adult fears about safety, young people and schools. Of particular relevance to this chapter is the fact that analysis of the background of young people involved in school shootings has revealed that they themselves had sometimes been bullied and evidence that the young people involved did not feel connected with or included in school and the activities of their peer group.

This chapter focuses on the more common issues that relate to feeling safe and getting into trouble in school, as well as the connections between these issues and out-of-school behaviour. The chapter presents the findings from original research in the form of a survey of young people from mainstream secondary state schools in a provincial city in England. The survey was carried out during anti-bullying week in late 2007 and is used as a point of comparison with other research available.

**School connectedness and belonging**

A sense of belonging and feeling connected to school (and other organisations or institutions) is important in helping to keep young people safe and out of trouble. The need to belong is argued to be a fundamental motivation that functions across a broad variety of settings and influences cognitive and behavioural patterns. Failure to fulfil this need is said to create long-lasting pathological consequences (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Schools are an important opportunity to belong or feel connected. The broader role of school in enhancing protective factors against adverse social circumstances and outcomes is becoming more appreciated in the United Kingdom. There is more research on this theme in the United States, some of which has singled out the concept of ‘school-connectedness’ as the most important school-related variable that is protective against adverse outcomes, such as substance use, violence and early sexual activity (Resnick et al., 1997).

One measure of ‘school connectedness’ in research uses ratings for five main statements that include the following issues: the extent to which