

Peer Awareness | Primary

Introduction

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Pupils with autism in mainstream schools are at a greater risk of bullying than their neuro-typical peers. One key area identified as contributing to this is a lack of knowledge and understanding about autism in children and young people. This limited or total lack of understanding combined with differences in social interaction associated with autism can lead to increased negative stigma. This can not only lead to bullying but also negatively impact on an autistic pupil's development of self-identity. Increasing autism awareness and emphasising that autism is a different way of thinking not a deficit can reduce these negative outcomes. Previous research has identified three effective types of information provision for reducing negative stigma and increasing understanding of differences:

Descriptive

Information which highlights the similarities between autistic pupils and their peers

Explanatory

Information which emphasises the lack of control that autistic pupils have over some of the behaviours they may display. That things are not being done 'on purpose'

Directive

Information that provides instruction on how pupils can support their autistic peers

We have developed a peer awareness programme for primary school aged pupils that looks to build upon previous antistigma programmes and emphasises the concept of neurodiversity. Importantly it includes all three types of information listed above, whereas most previous programmes have only included one or two types of information. The programme is co-delivered by Bridge School staff and the pupil's usual class teacher. Initial piloting of the programme has been very positive and the anecdotal feedback suggests that it has had a positive impact on changing attitudes and increasing knowledge. For the next stage of the project we have developed some more objective outcome measures to examine the level of understanding of autism that pupils have following the training (compared to before) and also any change in their attitudes towards autism following the programme.