

Advice for schools on dealing with racist incidents

The EU referendum campaign, and the aftermath of the vote, has been highly contentious. There have been reports of racist and hateful incidents across the country following the vote, including alleged racist graffiti at the Polish Social and Cultural Association in west London.

Some of these incidents have involved children, and some have taken place at or near schools. Anyone of any age can be affected by racism, but for young children it can be especially difficult and upsetting to process.

If you work in a school, it's possible that you will have to deal with racist or xenophobic incidents involving your pupils. Many schools have clear and robust policies on how to address racism and you might feel well-prepared to respond. Still, these incidents can be complicated and you, or some of your colleagues, might want a bit of extra guidance. Here are some of the main things you should know.

First things first

Schools are required to record and respond to racist incidents. If an incident involves one of your pupils but happens outside of school, you won't have the same requirements but you might still want to offer support to the child and their family.

You need to investigate all possibly racist incidents in school. If you conclude the incident wasn't racially motivated, record this information and deal with it according to normal school procedures. Be aware that the recommended definition of a racist incident is 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person.'

Responding to an incident

If you do have to respond to racist bullying or abuse in your school, you need to respond quickly and make it clear that intolerance is unacceptable.

Offer support to the pupils who have been targeted and apologise for the fact that it happened at school. Although it's not your fault, the pupils affected might feel let down or worry that school is no longer a safe place, and showing sympathy can help. Try to be sensitive to their needs and feelings. Pupils will have different reactions – some may have retaliated against the perpetrator, or find it hard to talk about the incident. Use your professional judgement in deciding how to offer support, and don't be afraid to ask for help or consult appropriate resources.

You'll also need to address the perpetrator(s). Of course, you can't excuse their actions in any way – but this doesn't mean you shouldn't try to understand their motivations. You need to clearly explain why their behaviour was unacceptable and take steps to stop it happening again. This will be easier if you can have an honest conversation about what happened.

Once you've spoken to the victims and perpetrators, you need to decide on a course of action. This will depend on the nature of the incident but could involve a referral to the headteacher or another appropriate member of staff, behaviour modification strategies and/or monitoring in case of further incidents. If racist materials have been brought into school, you'll need to remove and deal with them. Notify the parents or carers of all the pupils involved, and be prepared to explain what you're doing to respond.

If anyone other than the victims and perpetrators witnessed the incident, you need to have private conversations with them too. They should be made aware that the school will not tolerate racism and might need support to deal with the incident, even if they were not targeted.

You are required to record the incident and, if it is serious, you should inform the school's governors (who should also receive an annual report on racist incidents). Be aware that in very serious cases, you may need to involve the police.

If it involves an adult...

Treat racist incidents involving staff or any other adults in your school community just as seriously as those involving pupils. If an adult is the victim of racism at your school, you should still offer them all necessary support and make sure they know that hate will not be tolerated. Remember that your school is responsible for providing all staff with a safe working environment.

Racist incidents involving staff as perpetrators are very serious and should be dealt with according to your misconduct procedures. If a member of staff has targeted a pupil, you need to follow your local authority's child protection procedures.

Your school community

You've taken action to support the victims and deal with the perpetrators, but you still need to think about what this means for your school as a whole.

Perhaps it was an isolated incident, but one of the most essential parts of your response is the steps you take to make sure it's not repeated.

It's a good idea to remind your whole community of the school's policies on equality, behaviour and respect. You don't have to tie it to a particular incident if you're worried about the privacy of the people involved.

There are opportunities to discuss the importance of diversity and equality across the curriculum. Following a racist incident at your school or in your local community, it will be more important than ever to ensure your school is making the most of these opportunities.

For all schools

Fortunately, many schools have not had to deal with any such incidents but there is a lot of political tension at the moment which could be worrying or raise questions for many children. It's always worth reminding your pupils of the importance of treating others with respect, even when you disagree with them.

Resources

True Vision is a police-sponsored resource, with information about all types of hate crime and hate incidents. You can also use it to report incidents. <http://www.report-it.org.uk/home>

Stop Hate UK is a national organisation working against all types of hate crime and discrimination. <http://www.stophateuk.org/>

Tell MAMA is an organisation working against and supporting victims of anti-Muslim hate. <http://tellmamauk.org/>

Migrants' Rights Network is an organisation working for the rights of migrants in the UK. <http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk/>

Refugee Action supports refugees' rights in the UK. <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/>

Respect Me, a Scottish anti-bullying organisation, has a useful rundown of prejudice-based bullying along with some helpful advice and links. <http://www.respectme.org.uk/prejudice.html>

This is a free resource for schools from Parent Zone. For more resources and information on our work with schools, please contact info@parentzone.org.uk or visit parentzone.org.uk.