

Many teaching assistants are kicked, bitten and hair-pulled on a daily basis by the pupils they support

Assault

part of the job?

“ I work with a reception pupil who has extreme behaviour problems, and emotional problems too. I am being assaulted by this pupil every day. I have bruises and marks on my arms. I work with lots of pupils with behavioural problems and seem to have success in this field. However this one pupil is really bringing me down. I just don't have the energy anymore. I have a family and they are not getting the best of me. Do you think it's fair for me to ask for a change? ”

Like the TA who posted this plea for help to an online forum, dozens if not hundreds of teaching assistants are hit, kicked, bitten or pinched every day while they are at work.

In just one city, Bradford, more than 700 attacks on TAs and other support staff were recorded by primary schools between January 2009 and July 2010 – that's about three attacks every school day in a town of about half a million people.

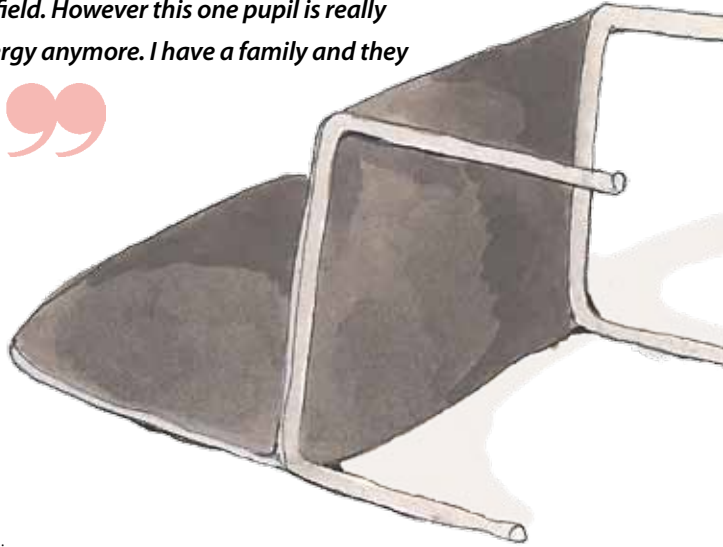
And those are only the attacks that were reported and officially noted by the school. Many more go unreported or unrecorded.

Unfortunately Bradford seems to be far from unusual. Last year the trade union Unison reported the results of a survey showing that nearly one in four teaching assistants had been physically attacked at school and that nearly half had been subjected to threats or abuse.

First aid required

Of 30 teaching assistants who responded to a small survey by *Learning Support*, 22 said they had experienced violence at school in the previous year. For eight of those TAs, the attack warranted some sort of first aid or other treatment.

And it's not just staff who are experiencing violence and abuse. Pupils are also at risk of being attacked in class or in the playground, and it is often the TA, learning support assistant or playground supervisor's job to protect them. Last year, there were 7,000-fixed term exclusions from primary school after a pupil attacked an



adult and nearly 10,000 after another child was attacked.

So is it “part of the job” if you are a teaching assistant or learning support assistant to be assaulted by pupils on a regular basis? Or could more be done to protect adults and children from violence?

‘Nothing is being done’

The trade unions believe it is not inevitable, and want schools and local authorities to take the problem much more seriously. The Bradford figures were collected by the GMB union's local convener, Ray Alderman. “You don't go to work to be kicked and bitten, yet nothing is being done to tackle this problem,” he said.

GMB wants all councils, and schools where they do not report to councils, to publish all the figures for physical and verbal attacks on staff. “We want to see schools and education authorities making concrete

plans with pupils, parents staff and all other agencies to deal with this epidemic. Society as a whole will benefit if this hidden problem is brought out into the open and dealt with," said Neil Derrick, GMB senior officer in the union's Yorkshire region.

It is an employer's legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees as well as other people who might be affected by their business (such as pupils!). The Health and Safety Executive says that "Your employer must do whatever is reasonably practicable to achieve this". This includes assessing all risks, telling you about the risks, telling you how you are protected from the risks and instructing and training you in how to deal with them.

All very well in theory, but what can schools, and school staff, do in practice to protect themselves and other pupils from being hurt?

Special needs

Children with some special needs – such as emotional and behavioural difficulties or autism – are more likely to be aggressive than others. Schools need to make risk assessments for these children, and make sure the staff working with them are fully aware of the risks and are trained in how to handle them.

In *Learning Support's* survey nearly everyone who had been attacked reported the incident to someone in authority at school, but fewer than half replied that action had been taken as a result. Only one in three had received any training in how to deal with potentially violent situations.

Staff have the legal power, and sometimes the duty, to use force when necessary to restrain or control pupils. The new government, like the previous one, wants to be seen as tough on bad behaviour in schools. Guidance published before the election says schools should never try to stop staff using force through "no contact" policies.

"The power to use force helps ensure pupil and school safety, and the risk with a no-contact policy is that it might place a member of staff in breach of their duty of care towards a pupil, or prevent them taking an action needed to prevent a pupil causing injury to others," it said.

But for many teaching assistants, the idea of using force on a child is fraught with difficulty. If you are not used to restraining or physically controlling children how are you supposed to know what to do?

You may be concerned that you could make the situation worse, or harm the child. And you could find yourself facing an allegation of abuse, perhaps even ending up in court.

■ In our next issue we will be looking in depth at the tricky issue of using force to control or restrain children, and hearing from teaching assistants who have been trained in "positive handling" techniques designed to head off explosive situations, and deal effectively with them when they do arise.

'You don't go to work to be kicked and bitten, yet nothing is being done to tackle this problem'

Restraining an angry child by force may be a last resort, but it still requires training. *Learning Support* talked to staff from an authority that ensures all of its staff who work with children are trained in ‘positive handling’.



Training for restraint

Nobody becomes a teaching assistant because they want to break up fights or forcibly restrain a child who is about to throw a chair across the classroom.

As we saw in the last issue, getting on “the wrong side” of a volatile child can mean being scratched, hit or worse. It is often teaching assistants who bear the brunt of children’s violence at school. So is it possible to keep order, and protect other children, without getting hurt yourself?

England’s education secretary Michael Gove says the government wants to make it easier for school staff to restrain children without fear of being accused of abuse.

The last government published guidance early this year stating that: “All school staff members have a legal power to use reasonable force to prevent pupils committing a criminal offence, injuring themselves or others, or damaging property, and to maintain

good order and discipline”.

Staff who may need to restrain or physically control a child need to be trained to do it safely – safely for the child and themselves.

In one local authority, Worcestershire, everyone who works with children and young people – from bus drivers to nursery staff – is offered training in “positive handling” strategies.

The trainers are themselves trained by Team-Teach, a company founded in 1997 by former teacher George Matthews.

Breaking away

The six-hour course includes learning about the stages of a crisis, strategies for de-escalation, role play for handling challenging behaviours, risk assessments, and listening skills as well as safe holds and safe techniques for breaking away or protecting yourself from hair pulling, biting, punching and kicking.

One teaching assistant, writing on

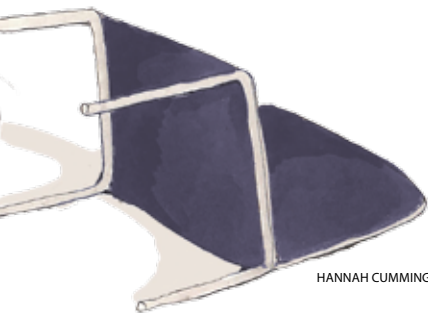
an online forum, described just such an incident: “I had a really nasty incident during playtime today involving a fight between older key stage 2 boys.

“What are we supposed to do? If we just let them carry on, parents will want to know why we didn’t stop them. If we try to physically break the fight up, and restrain a child to stop him hurting himself or another child, we could be accused of harming the child.

“Ideally we are supposed to remove other children from the situation and give the child concerned time to calm down, but this is very difficult when you are on a playground with 150 children”.

Team-Teach focuses on children’s feelings and thoughts as much as their behaviour, and teaches adults to be more aware of their body language and tone of voice to help prevent and de-escalate crises.

Restraint is always a last resort. De-briefing is an important part of the technique.



HANNAH CUMMING

But is six hours training enough, if staff are then going to be expected to deal, hands-on, with violent situations?

One anonymous teaching assistant claimed on an internet forum that some staff who had received restraint training “had to use these techniques on children, and received bruises and bites and in one case got hit in the face and needed dental treatment”.

Safety paramount

Dee Milbery is senior Team-Teach tutor in Worcestershire.

She says staff safety is paramount. “The ethos with bigger children is to leave the door open and let them run and give themselves some space.

“With smaller children, it’s like a terrible tantrum and the important thing is to keep them physically safe. Each time you have to ask yourself: ‘What should I do as a duty of care, and what can I do?’

“Every time there’s an incident, we go back and look at what happened. We always ask: ‘What could we change that would have made that unnecessary?’”

The debrief includes talking to the child afterwards about their feelings, and what can be done to stop the same thing happening next time.

“It’s always better to predict and prevent,” says Dee.

CONFIDENCE

Maxine Watkins is a Team-Teach tutor in Worcestershire and a teaching assistant for the county’s behaviour support service. She works with TAs and other support staff doing behaviour management training.



“I do think the training has changed behaviour in schools,” she says. “The TAs who have had the training may not use it, but they’ve got the knowledge and confidence that they know what to do if they need to, and the challenging behaviour is less likely to happen if they have got that confidence.”

Maxine stresses that it’s not just classroom staff that need to know how to diffuse and deal with a potentially violent situation. Playground staff and lunchtime supervisors are even more exposed to risky situations.

WE’RE ABLE TO MANAGE

Claire is a Worcestershire teaching assistant trained in positive handling. She says: “I was working with a child of only five, and he hadn’t been statemented, but he had very challenging behaviour. He’s very volatile and unpredictable. If someone brushes his arm, or someone is not sitting where he wants them to, he kicks off. He moans and groans, waves his arms about, and throws himself back onto the floor.

“With Team-Teach it’s the whole team, the staff support each other. We’ve got a small quiet area. Two of us will guide him to the quiet place, holding an elbow on each side. We have to try to calm him down. But he often won’t calm down, so I hold him from behind holding his hands on his legs and telling him calmly: ‘I’m holding you to keep you safe.’

“He’s lovely. And because we are able to manage his behaviour properly, he is able to stay in school and he is learning. Today he wrote his first sentence. He enjoys himself all the time except when things don’t go his way, but we don’t have to do a physical intervention each day.”

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