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# ENSURING PARITY IN ANTI-BULLYING PRACTICE: ADDRESSING ABLEISM IN SCHOOLS AND FE

A POLICY PROPOSAL

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# Ensuring Parity in Anti-Bullying Practice: Addressing Ableism in Schools and FE

## Section 1: Introduction

Ableist bullying is a significant safeguarding and equality issue that affects disabled and neurodivergent young people across schools and further-education settings. Despite its prevalence and impact, ableist bullying is often minimised, misidentified, or absorbed into general behaviour concerns rather than recognised as identity-based harm. This leads to inconsistent responses, missed safeguarding opportunities, and environments where disabled and neurodivergent learners do not feel safe, heard, or protected.

This policy sets out a clear, trauma-informed, and rights-based approach to identifying, recording, and responding to ableist bullying. It draws on lived experience, consultation with young people, and statutory duties under equality and safeguarding legislation. It aims to support schools to recognise ableism explicitly, respond with the same seriousness applied to other forms of identity-based bullying, and create environments where all young people can learn without fear of discrimination or harassment.

The policy is designed to be practical, accessible, and grounded in the realities young people describe. It provides clear definitions, outlines legal responsibilities, and offers concrete recommendations for staff, leadership, and governing bodies. It also emphasises the importance of meaningful youth participation, ensuring that disabled and neurodivergent young people have a genuine voice in shaping safer and more inclusive educational settings.

## Section 2: Definitions

This policy uses the following definitions to ensure clarity and consistency across all staff, settings, and processes.

### **Ableism**

Ableism refers to discrimination, prejudice, or structural disadvantage directed at disabled or neurodivergent people. It includes assumptions that disabled people are less capable, less credible, or less deserving of autonomy, safety, or respect. Ableism can be overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional, and is often embedded in school culture, expectations, and systems.

### **Ableist bullying**

Ableist bullying is any behaviour — verbal, physical, relational, or digital — that targets a young person because they are disabled or neurodivergent, or because they are perceived to be. It includes harassment, exclusion, mockery, slurs, stereotypes, microaggressions, and behaviour that exploits a young person's access needs or differences. Ableist bullying is a form of identity-based harm and must be treated with the same seriousness as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other protected-characteristic bullying.

## **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are subtle or indirect behaviours, comments, or actions that communicate bias, exclusion, or negative assumptions about disabled or neurodivergent people. They may be intentional or unintentional, and can include questioning someone's diagnosis, dismissing access needs, expressing surprise at competence, or treating a young person as less capable than they are. Microaggressions accumulate over time and can cause significant emotional and psychological harm.

## **Disability (Equality Act 2010)**

A disability is a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. This includes many forms of neurodivergence, long-term mental health conditions, chronic illnesses, sensory differences, and fluctuating conditions.

## **Neurodivergence**

Neurodivergence refers to natural variations in cognitive processing, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, and other neurological differences. Neurodivergent young people may or may not identify as disabled, but they are protected under the Equality Act when their differences meet the definition of disability.

## **Identity-based bullying**

Bullying that targets a young person because of a protected characteristic or perceived identity. This includes ableism, racism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, sexism, and faith-based harassment. Identity-based bullying is not a "conflict" or "falling out"; it is discrimination.

## **Trauma-informed practice**

An approach that recognises the impact of trauma on behaviour, communication, and emotional regulation. Trauma-informed practice prioritises safety, predictability, dignity, and choice. It avoids practices that may retraumatise young people, such as forced conversations, unexpected meetings, or requiring them to repeatedly retell distressing experiences.

## **Reasonable adjustments**

Changes or supports that remove barriers for disabled or neurodivergent young people, enabling equal access to education, participation, and safety. Adjustments may relate to communication, environment, sensory needs, routines, or processes. They must be anticipatory, personalised, and reviewed regularly.

## **Section 3: Rationale**

Disabled and neurodivergent young people consistently report experiencing ableist bullying in ways that are minimised, misunderstood, or overlooked within education settings. Unlike other forms of identity-based bullying, ableism is rarely named explicitly in school policies,

leading to inconsistent responses and a lack of parity in safeguarding practice. This gap leaves many young people without appropriate protection, recognition, or support.

Ableist bullying can have profound impacts on mental health, attendance, self-esteem, and a young person's sense of safety and belonging. It can also exacerbate existing trauma or contribute to new trauma, particularly when the behaviour is dismissed as "banter," "misunderstanding," or "friendship issues." When ableism is not recognised as discrimination, young people are left to manage the harm alone, often without access to appropriate adjustments or advocacy.

Schools have clear duties under equality and safeguarding legislation to protect disabled and neurodivergent learners from discrimination, harassment, and harm. Meeting these duties requires naming ableism explicitly, understanding how it manifests, and responding with the same seriousness applied to other protected-characteristic bullying. This policy provides the framework needed to close the current gap and ensure that disabled and neurodivergent young people receive equitable, trauma-informed support.

Schools and further-education settings have clear statutory duties to protect disabled and neurodivergent young people from discrimination, harassment, and harm. Ableist bullying falls within these duties and must be recognised as both a safeguarding concern and an equality issue.

### **Equality Act 2010**

The Equality Act protects disabled young people from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation. Schools and FE settings must make reasonable adjustments, eliminate discrimination, and advance equality of opportunity. Ableist bullying constitutes harassment related to disability and must be addressed with the same seriousness as other forms of identity-based bullying.

### **Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)**

Under the PSED, education providers must have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity
- foster good relations between disabled and non-disabled learners

This requires proactive action, not reactive responses. Naming ableism explicitly is essential to meeting this duty.

### **Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)**

KCSIE identifies bullying, including prejudice-based bullying, as a safeguarding concern. Disabled and neurodivergent young people are recognised as being at increased risk of harm. Staff must be able to identify ableist bullying, understand its impact, and respond in line with safeguarding procedures.

## **SEND Code of Practice (2015)**

The Code of Practice requires schools and FE settings to:

- remove barriers to participation
- ensure disabled learners are safe and supported
- involve young people in decisions affecting them
- work in partnership with families

Ableist bullying directly undermines these duties and must be addressed through both SEND and safeguarding processes.

### **Local authority and institutional policies**

This policy is designed to sit alongside existing safeguarding, behaviour, anti-bullying, and SEND policies. It strengthens these frameworks by ensuring that ableism — often unnamed or inconsistently addressed — is explicitly recognised and responded to.

## **Section 5: Principles**

This policy is grounded in a set of core principles that ensure responses to ableist bullying are safe, equitable, and centred on the rights and experiences of disabled and neurodivergent young people.

### **1. Parity of protection**

Ableist bullying must be recognised and responded to with the same seriousness, consistency, and urgency as other forms of identity-based bullying. Disabled and neurodivergent young people are entitled to equal protection under safeguarding and equality frameworks.

### **2. Trauma-informed practice**

Responses must prioritise emotional safety, predictability, and dignity. Staff should avoid practices that may retraumatise young people, such as forcing face-to-face meetings, requiring repeated retellings of distressing events, or minimising the harm experienced.

### **3. Lived-experience centred**

Disabled and neurodivergent young people are experts in their own experiences. Their voices, insights, and preferences must shape how concerns are understood, recorded, and addressed. Assumptions about capacity, communication, or credibility must never override a young person's account.

### **4. Accessibility and inclusion**

Processes for reporting, recording, and responding to ableist bullying must be accessible to all young people. This includes providing multiple communication options, reducing cognitive load, and ensuring information is presented in clear, supportive formats without infantilisation.

## **5. Rights-based approach**

Young people have the right to be safe, heard, and protected from discrimination. Responses to ableist bullying must align with safeguarding duties, equality legislation, and the principles of the SEND Code of Practice.

## **6. Account ability and transparency**

Schools and FE settings must ensure that ableist bullying is recorded accurately, monitored consistently, and reviewed by leadership. Patterns of harm must be identified and addressed at both individual and systemic levels.

## **7. Participation through the Lundy Model**

Young people must have meaningful opportunities to express their views, have those views taken seriously, and influence decisions that affect their safety and wellbeing. This includes accessible consultation, co-production, and feedback mechanisms.

## **Section 6: Recognising Ableist Bullying**

Ableist bullying can take many forms, ranging from overt harassment to subtle behaviours that undermine a young person's safety, dignity, or access needs. Staff must be able to recognise the full spectrum of ableism in order to respond effectively and prevent further harm.

### **1. Overt behaviours**

These are clear, explicit acts of discrimination or hostility, including:

- derogatory language, slurs, or mocking of disability or neurodivergence
- physical intimidation or assault linked to a young person's disability
- deliberate exclusion from activities, groups, or spaces
- imitating movements, communication styles, or sensory behaviours to cause distress
- interfering with mobility aids, assistive technology, or access arrangements

### **2. Covert behaviours**

These behaviours may be less visible but can be equally harmful:

- persistent questioning or disbelief of a young person's diagnosis or access needs
- treating a young person as less capable, credible, or autonomous than their peers
- exploiting a young person's sensory needs or access arrangements to cause distress
- spreading rumours or misinformation about a young person's disability
- isolating or excluding a young person in ways that are difficult to evidence

### 3. Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle or indirect behaviours, comments, or actions that communicate bias, exclusion, or negative assumptions about disabled or neurodivergent people. They may be intentional or unintentional, and can include:

- expressing surprise at competence or achievement
  - dismissing or minimising access needs
  - making assumptions about ability, behaviour, or intelligence
  - speaking to a young person in a patronising or infantilising manner
- Microaggressions accumulate over time and can cause significant emotional and psychological harm.

### 4. Online and digital ableism

Ableist bullying can occur through digital platforms, including:

- targeted messages, posts, or comments
- sharing images or videos without consent
- mocking or exposing a young person's access needs online
- excluding disabled or neurodivergent young people from group chats or online communities

### 5. Systemic and institutional ableism

Ableism can also be embedded in school culture, expectations, or processes. Examples include:

- failing to provide reasonable adjustments
- dismissing reports of harm as misunderstandings or behaviour issues
- applying policies in ways that disadvantage disabled or neurodivergent learners
- creating environments that are inaccessible or overwhelming
- expecting young people to “fit in” without support

### 6. Impact over intent

Responses must focus on the *impact* on the young person, not the *intent* of the behaviour. Ableist bullying is still harmful even when framed as “banter,” “jokes,” or “accidental.” Staff must avoid minimising or reframing the behaviour in ways that invalidate the young person's experience.

## Section 7: Responding to Ableist Bullying

Responses to ableist bullying must be timely, trauma-informed, and centred on the rights and experiences of disabled and neurodivergent young people. Staff must avoid minimising the behaviour, reframing it as a misunderstanding, or placing responsibility on the young person to resolve the situation themselves.

## 1. Immediate safety and emotional support

- Prioritise the young person's physical and emotional safety.
- Offer a calm, private space and check what they need in the moment.
- Avoid requiring them to recount the incident repeatedly.
- Validate their experience and avoid questioning their interpretation of events.

## 2. Recording the incident accurately

- Record the behaviour explicitly as *ableist bullying* or *disability-related harassment*.
- Include the young person's own words where possible.
- Note any patterns, previous incidents, or contextual factors.

Ensure the record is logged within safeguarding and behaviour systems, not treated as a standalone issue.

## 3. Trauma-informed communication

- Use clear, predictable communication and avoid putting the young person on the spot.
- Offer choices about how they share information (spoken, written, typed, supported).
- Do not require face-to-face meetings with the person who caused harm.
- Avoid language that minimises the behaviour, such as “banter,” “misunderstanding,” or “falling out.”

## 4. Reasonable adjustments to support safety

- Review and update reasonable adjustments to reduce further harm.
- Consider environmental, sensory, communication, and routine-based adjustments.
- Ensure adjustments are not framed as punishments or restrictions.
- Involve the young person in decisions about what will help them feel safe.

## 5. Responding to the person who caused harm

- Address the behaviour clearly and proportionately.
- Ensure consequences and interventions reflect the seriousness of identity-based harm.
- Provide education on ableism, disability rights, and respectful behaviour.
- Avoid restorative approaches unless the *young person who experienced harm* explicitly requests it, understands the process, and feels safe. Restorative conversations must never be used as a default response to identity-based bullying.

## 6. Communication with parents and carers

- Inform parents or carers of both the incident and the school's response.
- Ensure communication is accessible, respectful, and free from blame.
- Where appropriate, involve parents or carers in reviewing adjustments and safety planning.

## 7. Multi-agency involvement

- Seek advice from safeguarding leads, SEND teams, or external agencies where needed.

- Consider Early Help, mental-health support, or specialist services if the young person has experienced significant or repeated harm.
- Ensure information is shared in line with safeguarding and data-protection requirements.

## **8. Follow-up and monitoring**

- Check in with the young person regularly to ensure they feel safe and supported.
- Monitor for patterns, escalation, or retaliation.
- Review adjustments and support plans to ensure they remain effective.
- Ensure leadership oversight of repeated or serious incidents.

## Section 8: Monitoring, Recording, and Accountability

Consistent monitoring and accurate recording are essential to ensuring that ableist bullying is recognised, addressed, and prevented. Schools and FE settings must treat ableist bullying as a safeguarding and equality issue, not an isolated behaviour concern. Leadership oversight is critical to ensuring parity with other forms of identity-based harm.

### **1. Accurate and explicit recording**

- All incidents must be recorded clearly as *ableist bullying* or *disability-related harassment*.
- Records should include the young person's own account, patterns of behaviour, and any relevant contextual information.
- Staff must avoid vague or minimising language such as “friendship issues,” “banter,” or “miscommunication.”
- Incidents must be logged within safeguarding and behaviour systems, not kept as informal notes.

### **2. Monitoring patterns and trends**

- Leadership teams must regularly review data on ableist bullying to identify patterns, repeat incidents, or systemic issues.
- Monitoring should include location, time, individuals involved, and any environmental or cultural factors contributing to harm.

Trends should inform whole-school responses, staff training, and adjustments to policy or practice.

### **3. Leadership and governance oversight**

- Senior leaders are responsible for ensuring that ableist bullying is addressed with parity and seriousness.
- Governing bodies or boards should receive regular anonymised reports on identity-based bullying, including ableism.
- Oversight must include scrutiny of how incidents are recorded, responded to, and followed up.

#### **4. Accountability for staff practice**

- Staff must follow safeguarding and equality procedures consistently.
- Failure to recognise or appropriately respond to ableist bullying should be addressed through supervision, training, or performance processes.
- Staff should receive ongoing professional development on ableism, disability rights, and trauma-informed practice.

#### **5. Young people's participation and feedback**

- Disabled and neurodivergent young people must have accessible ways to report concerns and give feedback on the school's response.
- Feedback should inform policy review, staff training, and improvements to reporting systems.
- Participation should follow the principles of the Lundy Model, ensuring space, voice, audience, and influence.

#### **6. Reviewing the effectiveness of interventions**

- Schools must evaluate whether responses to ableist bullying have reduced harm and improved safety for the young person.
- Adjustments, support plans, and safety measures should be reviewed regularly.
- Leadership should ensure that interventions are meaningful, not tokenistic, and that they address both individual and systemic factors.

### **Section 9: Conclusion**

Ableist bullying is a significant safeguarding and equality issue that has too often been overlooked, minimised, or absorbed into general behaviour concerns. Disabled and neurodivergent young people deserve the same level of protection, recognition, and proactive intervention afforded to other forms of identity-based harm. Ensuring parity is not an optional enhancement to existing practice — it is a statutory, ethical, and human obligation.

This policy provides a clear framework for recognising, recording, and responding to ableist bullying in ways that are trauma-informed, rights-based, and grounded in lived experience. By naming ableism explicitly, strengthening accountability, and embedding accessible, youth-centred processes, schools and FE settings can create environments where disabled and neurodivergent young people feel safe, respected, and able to participate fully.

Achieving parity requires cultural change as well as procedural clarity. It involves listening to young people, challenging assumptions, and addressing the systemic factors that allow ableism to persist. When education settings commit to this work, they not only meet their legal duties — they build communities where every young person can learn, belong, and thrive.